

African American Boys and the Discipline Gap: Balancing Educators' Uneven Hand

by Carla R. Monroe

In a classic essay, “A Talk to Teachers,” the writer and educator James Baldwin reflected: “It is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person” (1963/1988, 11). To apply his observation to the teaching profession, he articulated the ways in which he would better Black communities through the educational enterprise. Situating present realities in a historical context, strengthening individuals’ resolve to overcome injustice, and encouraging young people’s willingness to question the world around them were among the most fundamental of Baldwin’s instructional aims. He concluded by urging individuals to exercise their agency toward transformative ends and to work with the country at large toward national advancement and cohesion. Despite publication more than forty years ago, “A Talk to Teachers” has remained persistently relevant for public school educators as professionals grapple with equity-based dilemmas involving Black populations. The schooling experiences of African American boys, by many accounts, require the greatest strides toward improvement (Noguera 2003).

Although educators are challenged to address a number of issues in Black male education, school discipline has surfaced as one of the most troubling aspects. According to data collected during the past thirty years, Black students are disciplined at rates that far exceed their statistical representation, particularly on measures of suspension and expulsion, in almost all major school systems (Children’s Defense Fund 1975; Drakeford 2004; Skiba, Peterson, and Williams 1997; Williams 1989). For example, Skiba’s study of a major Midwestern school district revealed that African American students represented 66.1 percent of all office referrals, 68.5 percent of out-of-school suspensions, and 80.9 percent of expulsions despite constituting only 52 percent of the district population (2001).

Both qualitative and quantitative examinations of the discipline gap, or overrepresentation of students of color in behavioral sanctions, suggest that the problem is most acute among Black boys (Ferguson 2000). Notably, racialized and gendered differences endure across both elementary and secondary grade levels (Skiba et al. 2000; Taylor and Foster 1986). A small yet compelling body of literature further reveals that teachers are most likely to discipline Black boys even when students of other races participate in identical behaviors (Emihovich 1983; McCadden 1998). Although disproportionality based on race and gender is independently disturbing, there is abundant evidence that students' disciplinary trajectories influence additional problems such as dropout rates (DeRidder 1990), standardized test scores (Skiba and Rausch 2004), and teachers' decisions to leave the profession (Public Agenda 2004).

Social scientists have established a promising information base intended to push educators toward a sound comprehension of the problem's development and endurance. Research conducted within this strand has been particularly useful in identifying recurrent trends, isolating reasons that prompt behavioral sanctions, and drawing connections to sociocultural factors that invite unequal treatment (Monroe 2005; Skiba et al. 2000; Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke 2004). Yet despite the increase in scholarship focused on underlying motivations for disproportionality, few researchers have set forth works designed to guide teachers' daily practice in redressing the matter.

This article seeks to broaden the present literature by connecting conceptual knowledge about African American and male culture to pedagogical and disciplinary techniques intended to support teachers' work. Heeding Baldwin's call for schools to become conduits of change, the article is written with an appreciation for the interplay of context and agency in closing the discipline gap. To this end, I first set forth theoretical reasons for African American males' location in national disciplinary trends. Special emphasis is placed on the role of culture as a key factor in why Black boys lead most measures of behavioral sanctions. I next analyze how research findings centered on African American and boys' cultural orientations may shape classroom life to promote positive results. More specifically, I sketch and discuss pedagogical strategies and teaching resources for K-12 educators. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of how future scholars may extend the ideas raised to remedy the discipline gap and further assist the academic pursuits of Black youth. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine's framework of cultural synchronization (1990) guides the article's interpretive stance.

Bad Boys: Disentangling a Cultural Construct

“Black boys in public schools either cannot or will not behave themselves”: based on most statistical reports, the aforementioned statement would seem to be more an affirmation of reality than rhetorical conjecture. Nationally, African American boys are overrepresented on indexes of school discipline ranging from classroom penalties, such as verbal reprimands, to institutional punishments including suspensions and expulsions (Gordon, Piana, and Keleher 2000; Gouldner 1979). Given the remarkable consistency of disciplinary action exacted on African American boys, questions about their personal dispositions, family backgrounds, and socialization would appear reasonable, as articulated in works by McWhorter (2000) and Ogbu (1990). However, there is considerable evidence that deficit explanations for the discipline gap are grossly inaccurate. In fact, no compelling research studies support the claim that African American boys are more disruptive than their peers (Skiba and Peterson 1999; Skiba, Peterson, and Williams 1997; Wu et al. 1982). Moreover, the high value that African American students place on scholastic, personal, and professional aspirations is corroborated across studies in abundance (MSAN 2003; Thompson 2002). Cultural constructs, however, appear to be a weighty influence on racial disparities in school discipline (Townsend 2000; Weinstein, Curran, and Tomlinson-Clarke 2004).



In analyzing the relationship between culture and school failure, Irvine hypothesized that impediments to youths' success stem largely from a lack of cultural synchronization between students and their teachers (1990). African American pupils, she argued, tend to possess a distinct cultural orientation based on their African heritage. Tenets of cultural continuity are identifiable in students' attitudes, speech, behaviors, referents, and so forth. Commonly cited examples of African-influenced norms include overlapping speech, candor in dialogue, animation, rhythmic presentation styles, cadence variation, and interactions marked by physical expression (Hale-Benson 1982). White communities, in contrast, frequently uphold different communicative standards such as linear conversations, deference to mainstream points of authority, and impulse control (Irvine 1990). As a consequence, cross-cultural interactions in schools may lead to culturally based misunderstandings that end in disciplinary action (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran 2003). For example, Hanna's study of a Texas elementary school indicated that Black children engaged in play fighting and ritualized insults for amusement or self-defense, whereas teachers in the study perceived the children's actions as authentic aggression (1988). Practitioners' mistaken understanding of the intent behind the students' actions had the most deleterious effect on referrals for Black boys. Because the education profession is disproportionately composed of White professionals (NCES 1997), many of whom have a limited understanding of Black culture, there is a strong tendency to sanction African American children both recurrently and inappropriately. Per cultural forces that accompany school failure, Irvine has called for teachers to approach their craft with a keen sensibility for aligning professional practice with community and familial norms (2003). In the area of the discipline gap, teachers are subsequently encouraged to shift their thinking from "Why can't Black boys behave themselves?" to "How can my teaching and classroom ecology support Black male success?"

Engaging and Involving African American Boys: A Blueprint for Closing the Gap

When working with pre- and in-service teachers, I am often queried for suggestions on effective classroom-discipline techniques. I typically respond with my own series of questions about the quality of individuals' classroom instruction, background knowledge of enrolled students, and interpersonal bonds with students and their families. Although the desire for a quick checklist of ideas for promoting on-task time and eliciting student compliance typically prompts the initial question, my response is offered in the hope that listeners will better understand that student behavior, like any classroom phenomenon, cannot be divorced

from its context. Beyond increasing cultural competency regarding African American children's communal orientations, teachers can substantially alter negative behavioral trends by creating strong learning communities and promoting a firm sense of attachment among students, families, and educators. When students are intellectually immersed in the academic tasks at hand and hold positive feelings about their schools, teachers, and roles as students, they are clearly more likely to become productive citizens. Although a wealth of information sheds insight into the theoretical and empirical components of culturally responsive education (Banks and Banks 1995), scant research provides guidelines specific to the needs of African American boys. To deliver powerful instruction and, in turn, affect behavioral outcomes, teachers must consciously shape their instruction to fit the needs of the young learners they serve. Despite the breadth and complexity of such a responsibility, a number of tools exist to support practitioners' efforts. The strategies presented below represent starting points for best practice with African American boys.

Completion of Student Inventories. At the start of the academic year, teachers should deliberately gather information about their students' personal, cultural, familial, and neighborhood backgrounds. In contrast to cursory or imposed knowledge about students' lives and interests, practitioners should elicit data-based answers regarding who students are, which topics interest them, how they learn best, and the like. These insights may be gathered through completing a student inventory list that is expanded and revised throughout the term. Categories should reflect areas such as family demographics, personal interests and skills, desired areas of knowledge, and so forth. Techniques for gathering information should range from informal strategies, such as listening to students' naturalistic conversations, to formal methods such as classroom activities and homework assignments. Teachers acquainted with the lived realities of their charges are positioned to create meaningful learning experiences.

Adopting a Proactive Stance toward Discipline. Along with a commitment to providing good teaching should come explicit standards for acceptable conduct. Effective teachers of African American students devote considerable time to explaining classroom policies, procedures, and the implications of those rules for students (Monroe and Obidah 2004). Moreover, they provide examples of the kind of classroom they hope to develop and continually revisit the vision set forth throughout the school year. Making expectations explicit is a critical step in avoiding misunderstandings and socializing students for classroom success.

Literacy as a Core Classroom Feature. There is growing evidence that teachers should focus their efforts on literacy initiatives to help

African American boys thrive (Slaughter-Defoe and Richards 1995; Thompson 2002). For instance, in her work with African American students and their families, Thompson found that weak skills in reading comprehension, among other academic areas, were correlated with behavioral problems (2003). Additionally, many parents in her study articulated the belief that non-challenging course content contributed to student boredom and, subsequently, problematic behavior. Fortunately, teachers may consult a number of sources to locate materials of interest to Black males while attending to instructional mandates, varying ability levels, and different subject areas. Resources include the African American Booklist maintained by the National Education Association (NEA); winners of the Coretta Scott King Book Award offered through the American Library Association (ALA); and selections from the Carter G. Woodson Book Award sponsored by the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS). Other useful series directed toward K-12 readers include the Harry Potter and Lemony Snicket texts and the Dorling Kindersely readers, as well as the Time Warp Trio, Green Light/Red Light, and Rookie Reader books. Popular authors among African American youths also include Walter Dean Myers, Gary Paulsen, Christopher Curtis, Mildred Taylor, Louis Sachar, Carol Greene, and Patricia McKissack.*

Incorporating Physical Movement in the Classroom. Although not explicitly focused on African Americans, Gurian and Stevens's research on gender differences suggests that traditional classrooms should be modified to become "boy friendly" environments (2005). Among the authors' suggestions for teachers are weaving kinesthetic movement into well-designed lesson plans; increasing their tolerance for elevated noise levels; limiting "teacher talk"; incorporating multisensory experiences; and valuing self-directed learning. Specific pedagogical techniques to achieve those efforts are encouraging performance-based activities in which students draw on their dramatic talents; making use of manipulatives; establishing learning centers throughout the classroom; engaging students in play, music, and art as forums for learning; and selecting opportunities for outdoor and community-based discovery and application.

Summary and Reflections on Future Research Directions

Currents in school disciplinary action have been uneven for more than three decades. Most reports and inquiries provide substantial evidence that African American boys receive the majority of behavioral sanctions in K-12 public schools. Consequently, the national prevalence of

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disproportionality based on race and gender raises critical questions about the educational hazards that confront African American boys. Theoretical frameworks demanding close scrutiny of cultural constructs and naturalistic contexts have set forth compelling explanations for recurrent problems in contemporary African American education (Delpit 1995; Ladson-Billings 1994; Shade 1989). Clearly, alternative frames of reference for normative behavior, coupled with shallow or faulty interpretations of others' conduct, can unduly penalize students whose experiences deviate from teacher- or institution-defined norms. Whereas Irvine's framework of cultural synchronization provides a necessary and thorough basis from which to remedy such problems (1990), few researchers have explored the concept in relation to the discipline gap. There is a striking lack of research in which community voices are captured.

Social scientists are encouraged to forge new directions related to the scope and tools of their inquiries. Many critical questions meriting further consideration are located in the intersection of culture, gender, and behavior. For example, linking the discipline gap to cultural explanations narrowly focused on race is problematic, because gender distinctions between Black boys' and girls' experiences are unresolved. Whereas some works address the roles of societal, environmental, and peer forces in shaping outcomes specific to Black males (Anderson 1999; Monroe 2005; Noguera 2003), the information is largely conceptual or situated outside the physical boundaries of public educational organizations. Future inquiries should reflect a tighter focus on the school and classroom levels to reveal how and why disciplinary moments emerge within learning environments themselves. Texturing cultural arguments with an appreciation for gender dynamics would lend a more nuanced perspective to the discipline gap than currently exists.

Much may be gleaned, of course, from research approaches that convey the perspectives, actions, and latent understandings of relevant stakeholders. Research methodologists, in fact, argue that community-based interpretations and portrayals of educational phenomena are an essential road toward significant contributions to the field (Merriam 2001). Hence, studies reliant on qualitative data sources are needed to facilitate fruitful conversations among relevant stakeholders such as teachers, paraprofessionals and other instructional personnel, administrators, parents, and of course, students themselves. Information gathered from youths and school officials should highlight how and why individuals attach meaning to behavioral actions, especially among Black males. Researchers should make particular efforts to learn from examples of teachers who work successfully with African American students and their families. Finally, parents should receive prominent consideration both in identifying highly

regarded teachers and informing educators how they can best meet the needs of school-age youths in their communities.

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