

Learning While Black

Community Voices on Race, Education and the Boston Public Schools

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For the educators and community activists spilling out of the “Education of Black Youth in Boston” roundtable discussion held last April at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Charles Desmond’s whirlwind tour of Boston’s future demography put stark numbers to the faces many see everyday: *More than half of the city’s children age 5 and under live in homes where the householder’s highest educational level is a high school diploma or less. ... Nearly half live in homes where the householder was born outside of the United States and does not speak English well. ... A quarter live in homes where the householder’s income is below the poverty line. ... Fully 17 percent live in a household headed by someone other than a biological parent. ...*

The Trefler Foundation executive vice president along with longtime Boston education activist Hubie Jones and colleagues affiliated with UMass Boston’s William Monroe Trotter Institute, convened the discussion to explore ways to improve the academic achievement of Boston public school children from diverse backgrounds. Trotter Institute director Barbara Lewis emphasized that by “black,” the organizers meant to explore the challenges facing not only African-Americans, but also Haitians, Caribbean islanders and the Afro-Latinos who make up the a majority of Boston students in crisis—and, in many ways, all underserved students.

The Boston Public Schools feature a standards-based curriculum in accordance with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The goal is to get *all* children to “proficiency” by 2014. But in Boston, as elsewhere, the academic achievement gap is widening between poor black, white and Latino students and their white middle-class counterparts. Boston school Superintendent Michael G. Contempasis conceded that the school system loses 1,500 to 1,900 students a year, many of them English-language learners and African-American males. “We are seeing that a lot of our kids feel disfranchised from the school system as early as the 5th grade,” said the superintendent. “We need to create an environment in which folks recognize that it is part of their responsibility to intervene when they see things happening that may not be ‘up to snuff.’”

“There are far too many children of color, especially African-American boys, in ‘subset’ programs such as

special education,” added Contempasis. “Most are there because no one knows how to handle them, not because they don’t know how to do the work. We need to develop a full-scale alternative education program that is not about merely warehousing children. And we have to find ways to bring back children who have dropped out.”

An imbalance of white middle-class teachers teaching black children from poor families often translates into behaviors and comments that students misinterpret as, “My teacher doesn’t like me,” thus shutting off interest in learning. Or the teacher interprets a student’s boredom in class as inability to do the work. (Jawanza Kunjufu states it simply in his book *Black Students. Middle Class Teachers*, “I don’t become what I think I can, I don’t become what you think I can, I become what I think you think I can.”)

Former Massachusetts Education Secretary Paul Parks, who taught a course in Boston schools for seven years, noted, “One thing that hit me working in Nigeria, Liberia and the Ivory Coast was the ability of Africans to sense where people are coming from. Very quickly, they understand your emotional patterns and why you’re acting the way you’re acting. We have children sitting in classrooms in Boston who will tell you, ‘The teacher doesn’t like me. Nobody likes me.’ More than likely the teacher standing in front of the classroom is white. A child often comes into the classroom angry. Maybe he’s been told white folks are going to ‘do you in, take you apart. They are not going to treat you fairly.’ A teacher sees that child’s actions as antisocial.” More often than not, the child described by Parks ends up in a special education class—especially if he is a black male.

“One of the things I’ve seen working at Madison Park High,” added Adiya White-Hammond, “is that black males, especially those who have anger management issues unrelated to learning abilities but can’t relate to their teachers, are automatically put into special education classrooms, where they spend all their time doing crossword puzzles and word problems. A lot of young people don’t make it to their senior year because as far as they’re concerned, they are labeled—they feel they are a lost cause and there’s no hope for them going to college.”

Teacher education programs, meanwhile, are not doing enough to prepare teachers to teach children who do not look like they do. Sabrina Gray, a doctoral student at UMass Boston and teacher at Boston’s Nathan Hale School, noted: “I have to humble myself and acknowledge that I don’t know how to teach young

black males. I am a female, not a male. Just as I learn differently, I have to teach differently to young black males. These young men are eager to learn, yet bored. The challenge is not to entertain them but to engage them. The question is how do we teach teachers to challenge young black males.”

Schools are also hampered by the culture of incarceration. Noting that the vast majority of visitors to the Suffolk County House of Correction are women and children, Sheriff Andrea Cabral lamented, “Children are becoming familiar with and comfortable with a stranger requiring them to turn their pockets inside out and part their hair to check for contraband. It doesn’t matter how friendly the person is or how well we train them, this is not good for children.” Added Cabral, “The criminal justice system is the outcome of a failed educational system.”

Donna Stewartson, a community activist and UMass Boston staffer, had two children in Boston Public Schools last year but now she’s had enough. “My son was in second grade last year and they had him in detention, which I feel is setting him up for corrections,” said Stewartson. “It’s a mentality we really have to change.”

Three years and a month into the occupation of Iraq, “war” emerged frequently as a metaphor for teaching black children in Boston Public Schools. Angela Paige Cook, who founded Paige Academy with her husband a quarter century ago in Boston’s Roxbury section, observed, “We need to also understand that it’s hard to do this stuff and be in the midst of a war.”

“When you think about how much money it costs to keep that war going, consider that is money that is not invested in our children,” added Lynson Moore Beaulieu, director of programs and strategic leadership at the Cambridge, Mass.-based Schott Foundation for Public Education. “You also have to ask what it would really cost if all our children stayed in school and were really being educated the way they need to be.”

Ulric Johnson, founder of Teens against Gang Violence and assistant dean of Springfield College’s Boston campus, worried that student voices are rarely heard in discussions about education and race. “We have an educational system that does not treat young people as intelligent human beings,” he said. “I have students who suffer from post-traumatic Boston Public Schools syndrome. They do not have the ability to write and think critically nor analyze critically. We do things *to* them, not *with* them.”

“There’s a direct correlation between young people shooting each other in school and how we see them but do not relate to them,” Johnson said, adding ironically: “Gangs have a better history of recruiting and retaining young people than the educational system does.”

Immigration and citizenship issues are among the tensions played out in the Boston schools. Community activist Gary Hicks asked how can immigrant parents work with their kids’ teachers when showing up at

school may expose them to a raid by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents. “What kinds of systems have been established for parents so they can go and talk about the issues regarding their children in safe circumstances?”

Roundtable organizers hope to spark a public outcry about the problem of children becoming disengaged from learning and eventually dropping out of school. Hubie Jones reminded the audience, “In the ’60s, black and Latino leaders in this town were basically on the outside dealing with Boston Public Schools. We couldn’t get anywhere and were not listened to. That has all changed. We are on the inside in many ways.” Jones urged black leaders to work with the mayor, the governor and the school system to forge a comprehensive educational strategy.

School systems nationwide look to Boston and New England’s colleges for leadership in pedagogical models, instructional paradigms and applied research. And effective programs are developed constantly. In Dorchester, the O’Hearn Elementary School’s inclusion program, for example, successfully teaches children with disabilities and significant developmental delays in regular classrooms with their non-disabled peers. In Jamaica Plain, the Hennigan School’s early childhood outreach program brings 2- and 3-year olds to the school twice a week for structured programs in which they learn how to play and how to learn. Importantly, their mothers or fathers are *required* to attend as well.

New ideas also need exploring. The youth-led Project Hip-Hop uses accessible topics such as hip-hop culture and *The Wire* television program to engage at-risk students in a process of critically analyzing the past and present so they can learn and organize to resist injustice. Parks is working to establish a public boarding school for poor children. Ron Walker, associate director of ATLAS Communities, a Cambridge, Mass.-based school reform initiative, urged colleagues to explore single-sex education models for young black men.

Paige Academy, an independent elementary school that emphasizes ethnic diversity and family involvement in its work with children from birth to age 12, sees fully 99 percent of its graduates go on to finish high school; 85 percent graduate from college. Parent-teacher meetings at Paige enjoy a 99 percent parent participation rate. “Parents come to meetings and learn something to take home and use with their children,” according to Cook. But there’s added incentive: if parents don’t show, their children are expelled from school for a week. “We are able to make children love school. We start school at 7 a.m. and close at 6 p.m. At the end of the day, the kids don’t want to go home. They love it. They want to be there,” said Cook, concluding: “A lot of children diagnosed with ADD are not ADD. They are like today’s fastest computers. They are ‘DSL.’ And they don’t want a dial-up teacher.”

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