"This Little Light of Mine": Creating Early Childhood Education Classroom Experiences for African American Boys PreK-3

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The well known Negro Spiritual "This Little Light of Mine" captures the sentiments of the hopes and dreams of countless African American families for their children in school in general and the early grades in particular. Too many dreams have not been met, begging the question of what happens when it feels like there is a conscientious effort to either dim or extinguish the shining lights (potential, promise, gifts) of African American boys at any age, especially as preschoolers? How do we reconcile this feeling in light of the persistent criminalizing and adultifying (e.g., racial profiling) of behavior of African American children in general, boys in particular, as well as the over-representation of African American boys as early as preK-3 in areas of suspension and, expulsion, and high incidence areas of special education? The authors discuss these racialized, gendered, and inequitable issues using national data; we present a short vignette, and offer recommendations for equitable early childhood special education.

Keywords: African American boys, early childhood education

Keith Guilty Even in His Absence

As the authors were writing this article, the second author received a frantic message from her niece, whom we shall call Synthia, the mother of a second grader (Keith, age 7). The family of five, including father and two daughters (grades 3 and 5) recently moved to a new state and, thus, school district. The parents were deliberate about choosing this community and school – higher income and racially diverse suburb of a major urban area in the southeast. All of the children earn high grades, seldom less than a B; the oldest has been identified as gifted since third grade; the middle child was referred for gifted screening in the former school and is being assessed at the current school; and Keith shows signs of giftedness but the program does not begin until third grade.

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Keith's teacher (an African American female) often sends home negative reports regarding his behavior, reporting that he is a follower and easily distracted (i.e., daydreams and is off task). The parents are strict disciplinarians both having grown up in the military as children and the father is retired from the service. His style is authoritarian (Baumrind, 1967). Synthia vacillates between authoritarian and authoritative. When grades drop and behavior is a problem, she is no nonsense. This mother sees great potential in her children and will not accept less than their best effort and work ethic. At the time of this writing, Keith's class was attending a field trip but his parents decided that he would not go due to poor behavior reported by his teacher. At the end of the school day, the teacher sent Synthia an email message to say that Keith had misbehaved twice during the field trip and would be attending in-school suspension. How is this possible given that he was not at school or on the field trip? How much worse would things have been at home had Keith actually been on the field trip? The parents must intervene before the light dims for this young African American male in terms of motivation, engagement, and self-image as a learner.

While this incident of "mistaken identity" could happen to a child from a different cultural group, the frequency with which African American children and boys in particular experience such treatment in schools (not to mention outside of school) far exceeds that of children from other racial and ethnic groups (see; Barbarin & Crawford 2006; Davis, 2005; Wright, Counsell, & Tate, 2015). In a gut wrenching book, Upchurch (1997) bemoaned that far too many African American males are convicted in the womb. He and others cry out and rail against zero tolerance policies and the eventual school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010; Barbarin, 2013; Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

The unique challenges and complex ways in which structural and systemic racism in society and schools shape the experiences and well-being of African American children, especially boys, including both implicit bias and explicit forms of racism, must be considered and understood if we are to disrupt the criminalization and adultification of behaviors among African American boys and, relatedly, the discriminatory special education referral process that results in the misplacement of African American boys in high incidence areas (i.e., emotional and behavior disorders, intellectual disability, learning disability, developmental delay). Despite the assertions and data presented by Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Mattison, Maczuga, Li, and Cook (2015) that *"Minorities are Disproportionately Underrepresented in Special Education: Longitudinal Evidence Across Five Disability Condition,"* decades of data say otherwise. Their study contradicts the overwhelming findings at federal, state, and local levels.

The dismal and abysmal educational status of African American males of all ages has a long history, with few reports finding positive experiences and outcomes, so much so that organizations have been created dedicated to this one group of students (e.g., Schott Foundation). Such terms as 'endangered' and 'at risk' have become a proxy for 'African American males'. Table 1 presents a quick snapshot of key issues facing African American boys.

Table 1: Status of African American Boy in Education in Three Areas

DISCIPLINE	SPECIAL EDUCATION	GIFTED EDUCATION
Over-Representation	Over-Representation in High Incidence Categories	Under-Representation in Three Gifted Areas
(Office referrals, Suspensions, and Expulsions)	(Learning Disability, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, Intellectual Disability, Development Delay, and Other Health Impairments)	(Intellectual, Academic areas, Leadership)

The Leaky Pipeline: A Closer Look at African American Boys in Early Education and Care Settings

Research shows that boys are extensively viewed as problems in school (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Noguera, 2008; Schott Foundation, 2015; Upchurch, 1997). In one study spanning the primary school years, Barbarin (2013) found that boys of color (specifically African American boys) are subject to disproportionately high rates of disciplinary actions, such as suspensions and expulsions. Nationally, per the Office for Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection (2011), African American male suspension is two to three times higher than White males; and they are gravely over-represented in special education (see ocrdata.ed.gov). This trend is not new, it has a long history, and can be found in national, state, and district data and reports, often shared by the Schott Foundation. It cannot be denied that the ways that African American boys are socially and culturally misunderstood result in misguided school practices, as captured in the vignette above that often disadvantage African American boys in punitive, unjust, and culturally biased ways in school (Barbarin, 2010; Wright et al., 2015).

Learning Denied: Overrepresentation in Suspension, Expulsion, and Special Education

In preschool, boys are five times more likely to be expelled than girls, and African American boys are most at risk for expulsion (Gilliam, 2005). The US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014) reported that African American males are suspended more than any other racial group, beginning in preschool. Of the school districts with children participating in preschool programs, 6% reported suspending out of school at least one preschool child. Racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions also start early; African American children represent 18% of preschool enrollment, but 42% of the preschool children suspended once, and 48% of the preschool children suspended more than once. Further, while African American males represent

only 9% of kindergarten classes, they comprise at least half of all suspensions. This excessively high rate does not exist for any other group of males.

In *Point of Entry: The Preschool to Prison Pipeline*, Adamu and Hogan (2015) showed how African American students are far more likely to be suspended or expelled than their White peers. These disparities begin the process of pushing students out of school at very young ages, hurting both their opportunities to access high quality early education, and their overall educational experiences once they enter the K-12 system. Focusing on importance of early education programs, this report makes it clear that schools implementing these programs need to be aware of the dangers of overly harsh disciplinary practices and to which groups of students these are most often applied. For instance, the authors state:

> While African American children make up only 18% of preschool enrollment, they account for 42% of preschool suspensions. Comparatively, White preschoolers make up 43% of enrollment but 28% of preschool suspensions. The practice of suspending and expelling children—particularly those younger than age 5—from early childhood settings can have profound consequences. These punitive measures come at a time when children are supposed to be forming the foundation of positive relationships with peers, teachers, and the school institution. Instead, they are experiencing school as a place where they are not welcome or supported, which serves as a troubling indicator of what is to come. (p. 1)

Beginning in preschool, teachers have been found to stigmatize African American boys with negative labels that are passed along from teacher to teacher throughout their school years. Labels such as "bad boy" or "troublemaker" lead to isolation and exclusion from classroom activities and, also disturbingly, they are picked up by the other children and perceived as truth (Barbarin & Crawford, 2006). The immediate, short, and long term impact and implications of such negative and stereotypical labels affects societal expectations of African American boys; it also influences the expectations African American males hold about themselves, socially, behaviorally, psychologically, and academically (Harper & Associates, 2014). Too frequently, African American males do not learn to see themselves as scholars – or they unlearn doing so after being told too often that they are not capable of doing well with grades and behavior (Whiting, 2009). Their light is dimmed some cases extinguished by adults responsible for enlightening them.

Mirroring the aforementioned problems and inequities regarding disciplinary issues, special education issues must be addressed. There are 14 special education areas that are placed into two categories of high and low incidence. It is the individual and collective experiences of the authors that African American males are over-represented in high-incidence special education areas rather than low-incidence areas. High-incidence areas compared to low-incidence areas contain more subjectivity, more stigma, and in which testing (which can be culturally biased and unfair) is commonplace. To place this into perspective, in high-incidence areas such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, and physical impairment, African American males are seldom over-represented as testing is precise and objective.

For example, Keith was found to be legally blind as a kindergartener in one eye (i.e., 20/4000) and requires significant visual correction. The degree of visual impairment is not subjective, his prescription is precise, and interventions and supports to correct his vision will immediately produce results – that work or not, and can be quickly evaluated to make corrections. It should be noted that despite this, Keith learned to read early, reads above grade

level, and enjoys reading, which speaks to his potential, regardless of subjective views from his teacher and objective views of his vision. Needing hearing supports, like visual supports, is not subjective. Measures are rather precise. Relatedly, having a physical disability, such as problems with walking, needing a wheel chair, and the like is not subjective. In such areas, little over-representation exists for African American students. This is not the case for high-incidence areas of special education.

There are also far reaching implications for placement and stigma associated with these areas or labels that are frequently misplaced on African American males. Many are unjustly placed in separate classrooms and even schools -- a form of in-school segregation both de jure and de facto. Those African American males with such labels as emotional and behavior disorders, and intellectual disabilities, are less likely to graduate and attend college. Instead, an unreasonable percent ends up in the penal system (Alexander, 2010). Their future is dimmed, bleak indeed. Keith's parents are doing all they can to keep the future bright for their son, and they refuse to support views espoused by Morgan et al. (2015) that African American students are under-represented and more should be identified based on their so called deficits. Like Ford and Toldson (2015), we oppose this view.

Essentially, in contrast to these special education and disciplinary trends, creating equitable (e.g., culturally responsive) early education and care experiences that foster healthy racial identities among African American boys contribute strongly to high academic achievement – a scholar identity (Whiting, 2009; Wright et al., 2015). As noted by Barbarin and Crawford (2006), "When African American children in general, and boys in particular, are stigmatized, it seems imperative to consider the role of race" (p. 82), as well as the persistent practice of assigning African American boys to low-ability classes and special education where the focus is on discipline at the expense of academics. This hyper-focus on discipline in relation to African American boys points to culturally insensitive institutional practices (e.g., zero tolerance policies) and barriers that ultimately aggravate and compromise the well-being of this population. Increasing efforts are needed to encourage and support African American boys in developing healthy identities, self-esteem, social competence, and academic skills in early childhood settings.

Against this problematic educational terrain are questions about the quality of early education and care for African American boys' that are not limited to the curriculum but also includes their social, emotional, and racial identity development. We, thus, offer questions to ponder regarding the quality and sociocultural context of the early education and schooling experiences of African American boys and their overall well-being in our nation's places of learning. These questions include but are not limited to the following:

(1) What opportunities are missed and strengths overlooked when teachers do not want to or do not know how to recognized and affirm the strengths and potential of African American children, especially boys? This question is relevant for all teachers, not just those who are White as witnessed by Keith's African American teacher.

(2) What types of culturally responsive educational experiences need to be in place in the early grades to support and encourage the healthy development of African American boys?

(3) How do we prepare teachers (and all educators) of young children to work effectively with all children, but especially those from historically marginalized groups (e.g., African American boys)?

(4) How do we support families of African American boys, those with supports and those lacking supports, to do the best they can with what they have? How do we help educators to not blame the victims, as was the case with Keith on a small scale, and on a much larger scale with Morgan et al. (2015)? How do we let families know that we are advocating for them with scholarly research that can withstand the test of time?

These questions have implications for the development and maintenance of culturally responsive early education and care experiences for African American boys. Questions that challenge the value and quality of early education and care programs are highlighted in a recent Vanderbilt University PreK study that released a set of troubling findings about Tennessee's Voluntary PreK programs. According Lipsey, Hofer, Dong, Farran, & Bilbrey (2015), children who attended Voluntary PreK begin kindergarten perform ahead of their non-PreK peers on a number of early academic indicators (e.g., early literacy, language, math skills). Additionally, kindergarten teachers rated children who attended PreK as better prepared. However, by the end of kindergarten, the difference flattened and by second grade, both sets of students lagged behind national norms.

Some of these findings much, like those from early studies (e.g., Perry Preschool) that focused on the benefits of preschool for underserved populations, assert that children who attend quality preschool programs experience positive academic gains, better social and emotional adjustment, increased appropriate classroom behavior, and decreased special education referrals. The most disappointing finding is that, by third grade, students who attended PreK were behind those who did not on some academic indicators. This finding is problematic for a number of reasons, but we will focus on one. Because an intervention wears off does not mean it had no effect and/or is ineffective; it means, instead, that the intervention strategies and resources must continue. We are mindful of flu vaccinations as a case in point. Vaccinations work -- but a booster shot is needed every year or the effects can and do wear off.

While it can be concluded that Tennessee's PreK is beneficial for many children across the state, something is happening in the following years that is ineffective. While the Vanderbilt PreK study raises general questions about what is happening in the grades after PreK that may be causing students not to maintain their PreK gains, for the purposes of this article, we question the academic quality of preK for boys in early education and care settings. Like schools throughout the nation, preK quality varies, with African Americans often attending less rigorous educational programs than Whites.

Like the Morgan et al. work (2015), the results from the Vanderbilt PreK study are inconsistent with the vast body of research conducted for several decades. PreK studies, numbering more than 150, examine the effect of public PreK programs and how that, although some flattening of gains occurs after children enter school, children who attend quality pre-school programs experience positive academic gains, better social and emotional adjustment, more appropriate classroom behavior and decreased special education referrals (see, for example, the High Scope Perry Preschool Project on its lifetime effects).

Despite these studies that reported significant academic gains, the early education and care experiences for African American boys are consistently circumscribed by race and gender.

These factors are both limited and limiting in ways that undermine the academic promise and self-identity of African American boys. For these and other reasons, how schools create positive and quality early education and care experiences for African American boy's matters. To begin, how do we define quality in the context of early education and care for children in general, and African American boys in particular?

Quality Early Education and Care Include the Following Basic Characteristics

- Delivered in developmentally age appropriate classrooms and settings
- Emphasize social and emotional development with a culturally responsive lens
- Stress cognitive development, with attention to opportunity gaps and potential, while also recognizing that tests and related evaluations of intelligence can be biased and unfair (and history is long, dating several centuries, see Gould, 1995; Naglieri & Ford, 2005, 2015)
- Utilize high quality, evidenced-based curriculum, with attention to ensuring that high levels of multicultural content are reached (i.e., transformation and social action)
- Have independent evaluations of classrooms, with constructive feedback and appropriate resources and supports that are culturally responsive
- Have high quality teachers, who receive support to continuously become culturally competent and demonstrate such competence
- Emphasize culturally responsive instruction/pedagogy that is individualized through small group and one-on-one interactions
- Provide alignment of instruction for PreK and K-3 to ensure seamless teaching and learning and mastering the content
- Involve and engage parents/families in schools and provide supports at home; recognize that families have different challenges, assets, resources; economic and cultural capital that are not distributed in equitable ways
- Connect African American males to gifted education, including increasing such access by creating talent development programs and activities (that is to say, early intervention programs) that concentrate on rigor, high expectations, critical thinking and problem solving. As early as possible, the gifted pipeline must be primed. As early as possible, deficit orientations (e.g., Morgan et al., 2015) must be interrogated in research, policy, and practice.

Quality early education and care must be culturally responsive and, thus, specific in support of the academic and socio-emotional development of African American boys. At minimal, this includes:

- Instruction matched to culturally-based learning styles of African American boys
- Curriculum that is multicultural relevant – that engage and interest African American boys
- Literature and resources that are multicultural – books, videos, materials, posters, etc., that reflect the racial and cultural backgrounds of African American boys
- Counseling that is multicultural and based on the development, issues, and needs of African American boys

- Tests and assessments that are fair and less discriminatory and biased toward African American boys
- Teachers trained in culturally responsive classroom management, with attention to the cultural styles and practices (strengths) of African American boys
- Psychologists trained to be culturally responsive at selecting instruments and interpreting results with African American boys in mind.

In light of these distinct and overlapping sets of factors that contribute to equitable high quality early education and care for African American boys in particular, we turn our attention to how to create positive and nurturing early childhood education classroom experiences for African American boys preK-3. We begin with how to support the self-identity of African American boys using a culturally relevant curriculum. Next, we discuss the preparedness of highly quality teachers to work effectively with "other people's children" per Lisa Delpit, meaning mostly White teachers working with students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds. We conclude with recommendations for families and educators from a myriad of disciplines.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum for African American Boys

What students learn in schools has a profound effect on their achievement and engagement. This truism holds for all age and grade levels. How can teachers engage young African American boys in the development of a positive self-identity (Whiting, 2009)? To answer this question, we turn to the work of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010), who state that in their vision of anti-bias education, "all children and families have a sense of belonging and experience affirmation of their identities and cultural ways of being" (p. 2). To help African American boys experience affirmation of self-identity, we recommend an authentic social studies teaching approach from a "history and me" perspective. This curriculum approach should be one that reflects, represents, and celebrates a vision for social change in America forged historically by all Americans, with a particular emphasis on African Americans.

History and me. Applying the "history and me" perspective, teachers provide curricular materials that expose African American boys to a rich and diverse African American history that, for example, focuses on identities of African American boys and men. Such exposure is critical to the boys' development of a healthy sense of self and their ability (and that of other children) to challenge stereotypes such as troublemaker and bad boy, which have become a stable part of the self-identity of African American boys (Wright et al., 2015). Reading and discussing picture books that focus on African American males—for example, the biography *Richard Wright and the Library Card* (1997), by William Miller and R. Gregory Christie, the historical fiction *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* (2010), by Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney, and *This Little Light of Mine* illustrated by E.B. Lewis is about African-American spiritual dating back to slavery that encourages children in general, African American children in particular to let their light shine for everyone to see. Together these children's books foster the development of a positive sense of self-identity and agency by demonstrating positive depictions of African American boys and me in society.

Mirror books versus window books. Teachers can contribute to African American boys' discovery of who they are, both historically and culturally, by designing a celebration of self-identity through African American children's literature that ensures that African American

boys see themselves in books that introduces them to "mentors on paper" (Thompson, 1996; Wright et al., 2015). African American boys, perhaps more than any other group of children, need access to what Bishop (1990) calls *mirror books*. Currently, children of color have far too many *window books,* looking into an all-White world, and far too few *mirror books* that reflect who they are. Books such as *Freedom Summer* (2005), by Deborah Wiles and Jerome Lagarrigue, and *Delivering Justice: W.W. Law and the Fight for Civil Rights* (2008), by Jim Haskins and Benny Andrews, provide examples of young African American men whose actions challenged racial discrimination in the South by helping members of their community register to vote and protest peacefully in order to declare that all American citizens are equal. Ford, Tyson, Howard, and Harris (2000) also encouraged educators to adopt books where African American males are high achieving and interested in school (see also many such books were authored by Walter Dean Myers).

Belonging and affirmation. While story time and independent reading are essential parts of daily classroom routines, these alone do not accomplish a sense of belonging and affirmation for African American boys. In other words, "it is critical for children of color to see themselves, their culture, and their perspectives in the books they read" (McNair, 2014, p. 69). For this reason, we recommend active, interactive, and gregarious ways to talk about history and to share mirror books with all children, African American boys in particular. Teaching social studies using children's books can include pantomime, choral readings, readers theater, mask making, puppetry, storytelling, and improvisation (Gangi, 2004; Rasinki, 2003).
In addition to being kinesthetic and visual, these arts-based approaches also encourage the development of children's self-identity and agency. For example, the children's book *Junebug* (1995) by Alice Mead, is about a young boy who lives in a housing project. At the age of 10, every boy in this housing project is forced to join a gang for "survival." Junebug does not want to join a gang; instead, he wants to move away with his mother and sister to have a better life. Junebug refuses to give up on his dream for a better life. As a motivation, he celebrates his 10th birthday with a collection of glass bottles filled with notes about his dreams and wishes. Teachers can highlight Junebug's determination to hold on to his dreams and explain how his bottle collection represents agency—a child's ability to construct and co-construct his environment through the practice of negotiating different courses of action (Wright et al., 2015).

Developing an empowerment club for boys. African American boys can and do benefit from a variety of African American male mentors who offer exposure to a broad range of possibilities. For example, meeting African American men involved in caring professions, such as nursing or teaching, can help boys expand their ideal of what is possible for them. Ongoing exposure to positive male mentors could also result in the design and creation of a boys' empowerment club. Ideally, teachers and students would develop such a club collaboratively. The club can serve a variety of purposes. It can take place in different parts of the school (inside and outside) and even after school. For example, devote a small segment of recess to structured learning games or quick science experiments. The club would be open to all boys, and certainly could be replicated with girls (Wright et al., 2015).

Boys might set up ramps of different heights and use toy cars of various sizes. Teachers could then ask boys to predict how far certain cars will travel on each ramp, and then boys would test their predictions (Counsell, Escalada, Geiken, Sander, Uhlenberg, Van Meeteren, Yoshizawa, & Zan, 2016; DeVries & Sales, 2011). Teachers also can encourage boys to create other outdoor learning games and science experiments with instructions for other children to follow. Teachers can engage boys in writing and directing a play. This can be a confidence

builder and connect to their study of history and exposure to mirror books that authentically reflect and represent African American males.

The club can serve as a safe place and space for boys to discuss and share their feelings about school, family, and their community, as well as their hopes and dreams. Finally, a club can provide opportunities for boys to meet and spend time with African American males in middle and high school to learn what to expect when they are in these grades, as well as activities and interests to pursue in and outside of school. The club can also serve as an opportunity to educate boys about college and career opportunities. Clubs can plan a Dress for Success Day, a Father–Son–Mentor Day, or a Boys Reading Day. Implementing these suggestions can contribute to African American boys' sense of self and agency as valued members of their classroom community (see also Kafele, 2009, Whiting, 2009; Wright et al., 2015). Culturally responsive education cannot become a reality unless teachers and leaders are culturally responsive. The cart must come before the horse.

Highly qualified early childhood teachers. Building on the work of James Banks, Ford (2011) discusses at least five dimensions of multicultural education (Figure 1) and several minimal characteristics of teachers/educators who are culturally responsive (Figure 2). What philosophy do teachers/educators hold about culture and culturally different students specifically, African American boys? What steps are made to ensure that the learning environment is supportive and nurturing of African American boys? What is being done by teachers to promote a sense of belonging and community for African American boys in early childhood education classrooms? How do teachers make sure that curriculum (e.g., books, videos, and materials) are relevant to African American boys? That African American boys see themselves affirmed in the materials? How responsive are teachers at modifying their instructional strategies to how African American boys learn? What tests and instruments are being used to capture the strengths and promise of African American boys? How are evaluations created to help rather than penalize these students (e.g., oral presentations, tactile and kinesthetic activities)?
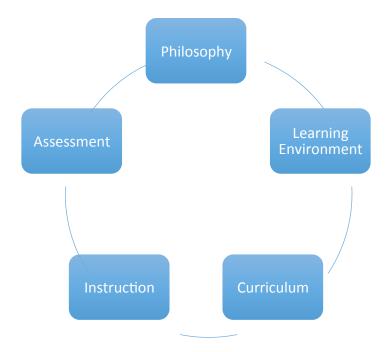

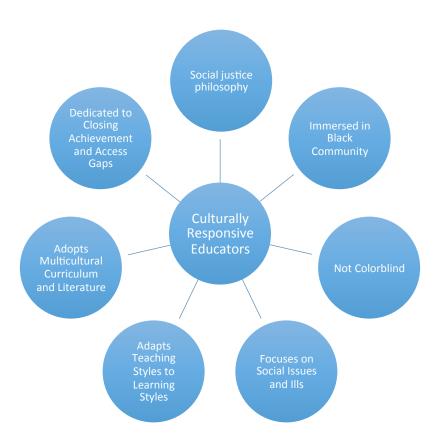Figure 1: *Five Dimensions of Multicultural Education*

Figure 2: *Sample Characteristics of Educators Who are Culturally Competent*

Culturally Responsive Leadership (Superintendents and Principals)

- Offer families meaningful ways to be engaged and secure the best educational opportunities for their children.
- Create positive and quality preschool and early education that is more accessible (and affordable) to families. This includes utilizing a culturally relevant curriculum that accentuates the promise of African American boys that lead to positive and seamless pre-K to third-grade transitions.
- Improve school climate so that students feel safe, supported, and engaged in — rather than pushed out of — school through culturally insensitive policies and practices institutionally and at the hand of well-meaning teachers.
- Offer African American families raising African American boys a full range of health and social services — in partnership with community-based organizations and other agencies — to ensure they are physically, socially, and emotionally ready to learn vs. having to worry about institutional barriers that tend to impede learning.
- Meaningfully and deliberately engage African American parent, student, and community members in school and district decisions.
- Study inequities in discipline, suspension and expulsion, and create policies and procedures, along with professional development to address issues.

- Study under-representation in access to gifted education and develop talent develop programs and initiatives to prime this academic pipeline.
- Provide professional development opportunities that prepare all educators to become (more) culturally competent, which entails dealing with deficit thinking about African American boys.
- Provide professional development opportunities to support teachers in creating culturally responsive education as depicted in Figure 1.

State Policy Makers

- Provide equitable access to affordable and high quality early education and care learning opportunities.
- Develop and improve data and accountability systems so educators, advocates, and parents have up-to-date information that can help them identify and address structural disparities.
- Disrupt the relationship between zip code and school performance, so that an African American male's address does not determine his educational destiny.
- Ensure all students have the effective and culturally responsive educators, rigorous standards and instruction that draws on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), and academic resources they need to succeed in and outside of school.
- Address school climate issues (e.g., criminalizing and adultifying African American boys) through policy change (i.e., zero tolerance policies)

Conclusion

African American males' experiences in education are often negative. The dismal statistics tell stories of injustice at all educational levels and in all areas of education – general education, gifted education, and special education. Disciplinary data are equally bleak. It is clear that a sense of urgency is long overdue to address the lived experiences and outcomes of African American males from birth and throughout their lives. In this article, we have addressed a small but persistent set of issues with our focus on African American boys at the initial stages of their educational lives. Our focus, thus, is on prevention and early intervention. We endeavor to support African American males early in their lives and disrupt the many pipelines that almost guarantee that they will not achieve or experience school and social success.

While not given a great deal of attention in this article, we rail against any and all discourse, especially those guised as research (e.g., Morgan et al., 2015) that is not only counterintuitive but also counterproductive and regressive. No one study should be used to negate decades of data indicating that African American males are gravely misidentified and misrepresented in special education and, thus, miseducated as coined by Carter G. Woodson many years ago and as noted more recently by Michelle Alexander, to name just two. The miseducation pipeline is not just leaky it is corrupt and broken. There are no quick fixes, but change is possible. Too much is at stake. Too many lights have been dimmed and extinguished and dreams denied when students are African American and male.

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