

The Mythical African American Male

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Our schools are microcosms of the society in which we live. That is, the beliefs and attitudes that are prevalent in the larger society exist in the school setting as well. The experiences of African American males in the larger society are duplicated in the school environment. If African American males are feared and "profiled" on our streets, they are similarly feared and typecast in our schools.

Stereotypical images of African American males have over time become part of the cultural psyche of America. For many individuals, including educators (since they don't leave their beliefs at the school-house door), these images are programmed at an unconscious level and generate an automatic response. Consequently, when unconscious stereotyping of African American males occurs in schools, it commonly produces faulty assumptions, false accusations, and fear. The resultant tension, misunderstandings, miscommunication, and conflict make it impossible for the African American male students and their teachers to develop rapport or a workable relationship. Most often, African American male students become trapped in a cycle of alienation that spirals from disciplinary referrals to suspensions and expulsions to academic failure and dropping out.

History and Mythology

African American male students are the victims of a mythology that began 400 years ago. Historical stereotypes created during the enslavement of Africans continue to define the status of African American males both in society and in our schools. Researchers from the Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (2000) found that African American children, particularly African American males, are disciplined more often and more severely in school than any other minority group.¹ To correct these disparities, we must first understand the role that such historical stereotyping plays in the school experiences of African American male students.

Stereotypes are never innocent creations; they always serve a deliberate purpose. In the case of African Americans, stereotypes were created to justify the institution of slavery and to rationalize the contradiction inherent in its existence in an otherwise free society. The most vicious, pervasive, and enduring stereotypes were attributed to African American males.

Joseph Boskin (1986) describes two predominant images of African American males that have survived in some form to the present time: the "Sambo" and the "Brute."² The "Sambo" image, which was a vehicle for presenting slavery as a benign institution, was of an inferior well-suited to a servile position in life. Sambo was most often portrayed as a grinning, slow-witted, buffoon given to outlandish gestures and physical gyrations and characterized by irresponsibility, laziness, humility, childishness, docility, and dependency. This image of the African American male helped the American public to regard African Americans as amenable to enslavement and deserving of second-class citizenship.

The "Brute" image of the African American male, on the other hand, represented him as an aggressive subhuman who needed to be controlled. This image, which has persisted since Emancipation and Reconstruction, was most notably associated with the theme of protecting the virtue of white womanhood. The Brute was portrayed as a primitive, animal-like creature, who was noted for his sexual prowess but unable to control his sexual impulses. In addition, the Brute was violent and prone to stealing, rioting, and fighting. Both the media images of the African American male criminal and the "driving while black" phenomenon of racial profiling are present-day carryovers of the Brute image.

Expecting the Worst

Unfortunately, the Sambo and Brute stereotypes survive in some form today and continue to have a negative impact on African American students. The Sambo image inhibits both the

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Stereotyping results in gratuitous disciplinary actions.

African American Male . . . continued

academic achievement of African American males and their relationships with their teachers, leading to low expectations as well as disproportionately high referrals to special education and low referral rates to higher-level and gifted courses. In many instances, teachers are more comfortable with the playful, jovial African American male student than with the serious, quiet one, who are perceived to have an "attitude." The Sambo image also creates greater acceptance for the African American male student who is submissive rather than assertive, the latter being perceived rather as aggressive or defiant.

The Brute image leads to a preoccupation with control and unjust labeling. African American male students are held to a higher standard of behavior than their peers. They are the most likely to be punished for minor infractions, and they receive penalties disproportionate to their conduct. In the same way that African American male students are tracked academically, they are tracked behaviorally. When one misbehaves, he is quickly branded a troublemaker and is henceforth never able to escape this label. In many instances, African American male students are set up for misbehavior. The teacher, knowing which "button to push," can easily provoke the student to an angry response and thus have cause to remove him from the classroom. The author has been told by teachers that some of their colleagues use this method when they do not wish to have a certain student in class on a particular day. Finally, while discipline involves both punishment and teaching, stereotyping results in unwarranted and detrimental disciplinary actions.

Changing Perceptions, Expectations, and Outcomes

A 1968 Supreme Court decision described school districts as having the responsibility to take steps to eliminate racial discrimination "root and branch." The root and branch of discrimination against African American male students are the stereotypical images and the faulty beliefs that they engender. In order to attack the racial discrimination that African American male students suffer in school, we must take steps to reject and eliminate these pervasive and persistent stereotypes. ♦

Notes

1. The Advancement Project and the Civil Rights Project, Harvard University *Opportunities Suspended: The Devastating Consequences of Zero Tolerance and School Discipline: Report by the Advancement Project and The Civil Rights Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, June 2000) http://www.law.harvard.edu/groups/civilrights/conferences/zero/zt_report2.html
2. J. Boskin *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986).

Implementing Change

The following steps will help eliminate stereotyping of African American males in your school:

1. **Examine your own beliefs and attitudes about young African American males.**
2. **Talk to African American males about their experiences.**
3. **Make others aware of the issues that African American males face.**
4. **Start a "truth about the African American male" campaign. When you see or hear reference to a stereotype, refute it.**
5. **Expect the best of EACH student.**

Resources on Gender Equity for Males

Beyond Heroes and Holidays

A Practical Guide to K-12 Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education and Staff Development

This curriculum helps the user to analyze the classroom for bias and offers a transforming classroom pedagogy. • Edited by Deborah Menkart, Enid Lee, and Margo Okazawa-Rey (1998) • NECA-Network of Educators on the Americas, PO Box 73038, Washington, DC 20056 • 800-763-9131 • ISBN: 1878554115 • www.teachingforchange.org

Manhood in America

A Cultural History

As the first cultural history of men in America, this book examines how the experience of manhood has defined American males and the American culture. The author shows that throughout history the key driving force for men has been to prove their masculinity. • By Michael S. Kimmel (1996) • The Free Press, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY, 10020 • ISBN: 002874067X • www.simonsays.com/thefreepress

The Politics of Manhood

Profeminist Men Respond to the Mythopoetic Men's Movement

This compilation of essays provides a provocative dialogue among men—including leaders from both the profeminist and mythopoetic sides of the issue—on the politics of the contemporary men's movement and the current crisis of masculinity. • Edited by Michael S. Kimmel (1995) • Temple University Press, 1601 N. Broad Street USB 305, Philadelphia, PA 19122 • 800-447-1656 • ISBN: 1566393663 • www.temple.edu/tempress

Politics of Masculinities

Men in Movements (Gender Lens)

Messner explores such topics as "Mythopoetic Men's Movements," "Sexual and Racial Identity Politics," and "Radical and Socialist Feminist Men's Movements." • By Michael A. Messner (1997) • Sage Publications Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320 • 805-499-0721 • Email: info@sagepub.com • ISBN: 0803955766 • www.sagepub.com

Raising Cain

Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys

Two leading child psychologists share what they have learned in more than 35 years of combined experience working with boys and their families. They reveal a nation of boys who are hurting—sad, afraid, angry, and silent. The authors set out to answer this basic, crucial question: What do boys need that they're not getting? They illuminate the forces that threaten our boys, such as the belief that "cool" equals macho strength and stoicism. Cutting through outdated theories of "mother blame," "boy biology," and "testosterone," the authors shed light on the destructive emotional training our boys receive—the emotional miseducation of boys. • By Daniel Kindlon and Michael Thompson (1999) • The Ballantine Publishing Group, 201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022 • 800-726-0600 • ISBN: 0345424573 • www.randomhouse.org/bb

Real Boys' Voices

In this book William Pollack talks directly to many boys nationwide. They discuss such issues as homophobia, losing their virginity, and gender roles. • By William S. Pollack and Todd Shuster (2000) • Random House, Inc., 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036 • 212-782-9000 • Web: www.randomhouse.org

Theorizing Masculinities

This anthology from a variety of disciplines explores ways of studying men and masculinities. The collection includes essays on the intersections of masculinity, race, sexual orientation, and class. • Edited by Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (1994) • Sage Publications, Inc., 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320 • 805-499-0721 • Email: info@sagepub.com • ISBN: 0803955766 • www.sagepub.com

Tough Guise

Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity

This groundbreaking video explores what it means to be male in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century. Tough Guise is the first educational video geared toward high school and college students to look systematically at the relationship between images of popular culture and the social construction of masculine identities. • By Jackson Katz (1999) • Media Education Foundation, 26 Center Street, Northampton, MA 01060 • 800-897-0089 • www.mediaed.org

Violence

Reflections on a National Epidemic

In this groundbreaking book, James Gilligan examines the epidemic foremost in the minds of most Americans—violence. As he tells the stories of the men he treated at a hospital for the criminally insane, Dr. Gilligan traces the devastating links between violence and shame. He shows how that deadly emotion drives people to destroy others and even themselves rather than suffer a loss of self-respect. • By James Gilligan (1997) • Vintage Books, Random House, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036 • 212-782-9000 • ISBN: 0679779124 • www.randomhouse.com/vintage/

Why Boys Don't Talk and Why We Care

A Mother's Guide to Connection

This book, written for parents of boys, is also an excellent resource for educators and others who work with boys. The authors discuss issues that boys face from a cross-cultural perspective, acknowledging that the existing literature and research tend to have a white, middle-class bias. • By Susan Morris Shaffer and Linda Perlman Gordon (2000) • Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc., 5454 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 655, Chevy Chase, MD 20815 • 301-657-7741 • ISBN: 0967961106 • www.maec.org