From Brilliant Baby to Child Placed At Risk: The Perilous Path of African American Boys in Early Childhood Education

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The preschool and early elementary years play a major role in transforming young African American boys from "brilliant babies" into "children placed at risk". A preschool to prison pipeline now exists that is becoming increasingly apparent. It runs from preschool settings through elementary and middle school, into the high schools from which young African American men continue to drop out in staggering numbers, and ultimately, into federal and state prisons. A number of critical factors affect the status of African American boys in early childhood education. They include quality of preschool setting; teacher beliefs, expectations, and behavior; acquisition of early literacy and school readiness skills; and curriculum quality and relevance. In order to address these issues and the broader context of early childhood education for African American boys, a wide range of recommendations are made for consideration by communities and policymakers.

The concept of "early childhood education" has come to represent the context of education for young children from preschool through third grade. During this period that typically covers age three to eight, the young child is undergoing a series of transformations that reflect tremendous growth and development in the cognitive, social, and emotional realms. As the landscape of early childhood education is more closely examined, however, one sees a terrain fraught with potential landmines for young African American boys. These brilliant little minds typically enter the preschool at age 3 with the innate curiosity and motivation that characterize their age cohort, and often reflect the psychomotor precocity that has been well-documented in infants of color (Werner, 1972). They emerge from this six-year period and head into fourth grade with the lowest reading levels; the lowest expectations from teachers; and the highest suspension, expulsion, and special education referral rates of any group of children in the United States. The transformation of these "brilliant babies" into children "placed at risk" (Boykin, 2000), during a period of time when their potential is unlimited, is a phenomenon that must be addressed by educators, policymakers, parents, and the nation as a whole.

The present article discusses the importance of early childhood education to long-term outcomes for young African American boys; describes the current context of early childhood education for young African American boys; and makes recommendations to community members and policymakers for strategies to enhance the early childhood context for African American boys.

Why Early Childhood Education is Important to Long-term Educational and Social Outcomes for African American Boys

Moving toward the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the overall quality of life for young African American males continues to be a national disgrace. Young Black men continue to be disproportionately incarcerated in the nation’s penal system, experience higher rates of death by homicide and HIV, and have less access to health insurance (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). They have experienced a chronic decline in labor force participation (Holzer, Offner, & Sorenson, 2004), alarming school drop-out rates (Orfield, Losen, Wald & Swanson, 2004), higher rates of suspension and expulsion from schools than any other group (Drakeford, 2004), disproportionate
number of referrals for special education services (Townsend, 2000), and generally lower levels of educational attainment than their peers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004).

High quality early childhood education programs have the potential to address long-term outcomes for African American males in a variety of contexts. Longitudinal studies of the impact of early childhood interventions (see Schweinhart et al., 2004), and the related cost-benefit analyses that have been conducted on many of the projects, have clearly demonstrated the long-term value to children, families, and society as a whole. Reynolds, Temple, and White (2009) summarize the broad range of economic benefits provided by high quality early childhood programs:

Cost-benefit analyses illustrate the distribution of the benefits across different segments of society. . . These benefits include increased earnings capacity in adulthood projected from educational attainment as well as the benefit to parents from the provision of part-day care for children. Benefits to the general public include averted expenditures of remedial education and social welfare spending by governments, reduced tangible expenditures to crime victims as a result of lower rates of crime, and increased tax revenues to state and federal governments as a result of higher earnings capacity. (pp. 7-8)

Table 1 provides examples of the range of social and economic benefits that have been demonstrated as a result of cost-benefit analyses of early childhood programs.

Table 1

Examples of Monetized Benefits Reported in Cost-Benefit Analyses of Early Childhood Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit Category</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Effect Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade retention</td>
<td>Reduced rates of grade retention</td>
<td>Expenditure for one year of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>Fewer years of special education services</td>
<td>Weighted average annual cost for various categories of special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>Average duration of program participation</td>
<td>Annual opportunity cost of parent’s (typically mother’s) time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maltreatment</td>
<td>Fewer incidences of child abuse/neglect</td>
<td>Weighted average annual cost for in-home services and out-of-home care, including administrative and investigation costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public assistance</td>
<td>Fewer months of public assistance participation</td>
<td>Average monthly payment for AFDC, Food Stamps, and Medicaid, including administrative costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult health</td>
<td>Lower rates of tobacco use</td>
<td>Value of additional years of life 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime earnings</td>
<td>Higher rates of high school completion, including GED</td>
<td>Projected increase in lifetime earnings associated with high school completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile crime</td>
<td>Fewer petitions to juvenile court</td>
<td>Weighted average expenditures per petition to juvenile court 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult crime</td>
<td>Fewer incidences of adult arrest, conviction, and/or incarceration</td>
<td>Cost of an adult criminal career 2, 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1 Estimates generally exclude benefits associated with reduce morbidity (illness prior to death). 2 Estimates typically include criminal justice system expenditures for incarceration, probation, and parole, as well as victim costs. Tangible victim costs (e.g., productivity loss, mental health care expenditures, property loss) and intangible victim costs (e.g., pain and suffering) can be estimated separately. 3 Treatment effects may be estimated using adult crime data from administrative records and self reports or projected from measures of juvenile delinquency. 4 The average duration of adult criminal career is approximately 26 years (from age 19 through 44). Adapted from Reynolds, A., Temple, J., & White, B. (2009, April). Cost-effective early childhood development programs: A synthesis of evidence in the first decade of life. Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development biennial, in Denver, CO. Retrieved from http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ICD/CLS/docs/cbasummary2009.pdf. Reprinted with permission.
Each of these social and economic benefits has long-term implications for the development of young African American males. Any programmatic strategy that can lower grade retention rates; reduce time spent in special education; reduce incidents of child abuse and neglect; reduce time spent on public assistance; lower rates of tobacco use; increase high school completion rates and subsequent earnings; and reduce costs related to both juvenile and adult crime, is a strategy that must be examined closely by educators and the elected officials chosen to serve the public interest.

The current status of African American males in early childhood education, however, is extremely problematic. Wald and Losen (2003) have written about the “school to prison pipeline,” the insidious relationship between what happens to African American males in school and their placement in the nation’s penitentiaries. There is now a preschool to prison pipeline that is becoming increasingly apparent. It runs from preschool settings through elementary and middle schools, into the high schools from which young African American men continue to drop out in staggering numbers, and ultimately into federal and state prisons. As James Comer (2004) has noted:

Our society is paying a high cost for the control, containment and support of adults who, if they had been helped in school, and in the home and community could have been productive, contributing citizens. The inability to function . . . well in one generation very often leads to the same inability in subsequent generations. Increasingly repressive controls will be needed to manage the growing number of young people who are not being adequately prepared for mainstream adult life. (p. 9)

Given the promise and potential of high quality early childhood programs to dramatically alter the life trajectories of many young African American boys, it is a national disgrace that preschool programs are now serving as the incubators for a continued legacy of low expectations and educational failure. The work of Gilliam (2005) has shown, for example, the expulsion rate for preschoolers to be higher than the K-12 expulsion rate, and that African American boys are the most likely to be expelled from preschool. It is also documented that children from high poverty neighborhoods are less likely to be exposed to high quality early childhood settings (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007).

AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: THE CURRENT CONTEXT

A number of critical factors (outside of the family) affect the status of African American boys in early childhood education. Among these are quality of preschool setting; teacher beliefs, expectations, and behaviors; acquisition of early literacy and school readiness skills; and curriculum quality and relevance. Each of these factors is related to developmental trajectories of young African American children in general. However, they are particularly salient in the lives of young African American boys given the early consolidation of identities, roles, and behavioral patterns in school settings.

Quality of Preschool Setting

Issues related to quality continue to be at the forefront of research and policy debates related to early childhood programming. Definitions of quality are varied and multidimensional. Katz (1993) posited a “top-down perspective” that looks at quality by examining characteristics of the setting such as adult-child ratio, staff qualifications, quality of adult-child relationships, and aspects of the physical environment (Katz, 1993). This approach is reflected by the majority of research studies that link quality to child outcomes (Locasale-Crouch et al., 2007).

Despite increased federal funding for Head Start and the proliferation of state funded early childhood programs (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2008) many low-income African American children are enrolled in preschool settings that are of questionable quality. Locasale-Crouch and colleagues (2007) found that children from higher poverty preschools,
serving higher proportions of non-Caucasian children, were less likely to be exposed to practices associated with social, emotional, and academic gains. Generally, they describe preschool classrooms in terms of five “profiles” that identified characteristics ranging from the “highest quality” (Profile 1) to the “lowest quality” (Profile 5). Their descriptions of the five quality profiles are as follows:

Profile 1 (14.5% of the sample)—“Classrooms in this profile attained scores more than 1 standard deviation above the sample mean on positive indicators of quality, including positive climate, teacher sensitivity, behavior management, productivity, and quality of feedback. These classrooms show consistent social, emotional and instructional support to children...this profile contained classrooms with the lowest proportions of non-Caucasians...” (p. 10)

Profile 2 (16.9% of the sample)—“...classrooms were near or above the mean on indicators of social and emotional climate...fewer teachers with a B.A. and early childhood certification than expected...lower proportions of non-Caucasian students...” (p. 11)

Profile 3 (31.4% of the sample)—“...above the mean on positive emotional indicators of quality including positive emotional climate, teacher sensitivity, and behavior management...instructional support is considerably less than Profile 2. Classrooms in this profile contain a smaller proportion of non-Caucasian students...” (p. 11)

Profile 4 (18.5% of the sample)—“Classrooms in this profile attained scores slightly below the mean on positive...and negative indicators of social and emotional quality...These classrooms offer some social and emotional support but instructional support is very limited...Additionally, this profile contained significantly more programs located in a public school, the longest program days, the highest number of children in the class and the highest adult/child ratio...Lastly, classrooms in this profile contained lower proportions of non-Caucasian students than Profile 5.” (p. 12)

Profile 5 (18.8% of the sample)—“Classrooms in this cluster attained scores more than 1 standard deviation below the mean on positive social and emotional indicators of quality (positive climate, teacher sensitivity, and behavior management) and 1 standard above the mean on both negative indicators (negative climate and over control)...Instructional support indicators were nearly a full standard deviation below the mean...this profile contained classrooms with the highest proportion of non-Caucasians...” (p. 12 emphasis added)

The findings of LoCasale-Crouch and colleagues (2007) are consistent with previous studies (Pianta et al., 2005) that have documented the relationship between poverty and low-quality child care environments. In addition to an overall lower level of quality, many preschool settings serving low-income African American children are not equipped to deal with the broad range of social and emotional issues that often produce extremely challenging behaviors (McCabe & Frede, 2007). Those settings that are best able to respond to children’s emotional needs and challenging behaviors are linked to support systems, such as teacher access to mental health consultation (Gilliam, 2008; Raver et al., 2008).

Peisner-Feinberg and colleagues (2001) examined the relationship between quality of the preschool experience and the cognitive and socioemotional development of children from four to eight years of age. They found a continuing influence of preschool quality on children’s receptive language ability, math ability, cognitive and attention skills, problem behaviors and sociability through the end of the second grade. Peisner-Feinberg and colleagues examined two aspects of quality—observed classroom practices and the closeness of the teacher-child relationship. Among their findings were the following:

- Children who attended child care programs with higher quality classroom practices tended to have higher language scores, $F(1,165) = 10.69, p < .002$. (p. 1544)
- Children whose preschool teachers rated their relationships as closer tended to have higher language scores over time, $F(1,165) = 7.52, p < .007$. (p. 1544)
- Higher math scores were associated with better quality child care classroom practices, $F(2, 153) = 3.27, p < .04$. (p. 1548)
- Teachers reported fewer problem behaviors in second grade for children who had closer relationships with their preschool teachers, $F(3,152) = 3.50, p < .02$. (p. 1548)
- Closer kindergarten teacher-child relationships were also associated with higher ratings of sociability in second grade. (p. 1548)
Peisner-Feinberg and colleagues (2001) conclude that “It may be that children with positive early experiences with non-parental caregivers learn a pattern of interacting that facilitates their relationships with future caregivers, as well as their ability to utilize experiences provided in these environments to further their development” (p. 1551). Fostering “positive early experiences with non-parental caregivers” is clearly a challenge for young African American boys, a challenge that has a direct bearing on later life outcomes.

**Teacher Beliefs, Expectations, and Behaviors**

It is through the expectations and subsequent behavior of teachers that social class stratification in America is operationalized from one generation to the next. The literature shows that teachers have lower expectations for students who are from low-income backgrounds (Rist, 2000), and that these expectations are based on social class, race, and other student characteristics (Good & Brophy, 1994). The combination of race and gender has placed young African American boys at considerable risks in early childhood settings.

Barbarin and Crawford (2006) reported on the reflections of observers involved in a study of preschool program quality and outcomes. They noted that in many of the pre-K and kindergarten classrooms they visited, a single child was separated from the group and placed at a desk next to the teacher’s desk. These children were the ones considered “difficult” and “disruptive.” According to Barbarin and Crawford,

> The children who were separated and excluded ‘were almost always boys of color’, an observer reported. Another observer concurred: ‘I observed it over and over again. And it wasn’t [that it was only] boys. It was always, always Black boys.’ The singling out of children in this way effectively assigned them to the stigmatized roles of troublemaker or bad child as clearly as if the words had been stamped on their foreheads. (p. 80)

Barbarin and Crawford (2006) noted the transformation of young African American boys from “compliant, happy, and productive” in one setting to reflecting “a downward spiral of the child’s behavior in a second center or school with different teaching practices and a different emotional climate” (p. 81). They quoted one observer as follows:

> One boy had been doing really well in pre-K. He was engaged, motivated and on task in observations of him in pre-K. However, when I observed him in kindergarten he was wild and off task much of the time, but I think he was just bored. The teacher did not respond effectively to stimulate and engage him. Instead of finding a challenge that would interest him, she did the opposite and denied him opportunities. (p. 81)

The observations reported by Barbarin and Crawford (2006) are entirely consistent with numerous research studies that have shown the quality of the teacher-child relationship to be a major contributor to school success in the early childhood years (Birch & Ladd, 1998; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes et al., 2008). Howes and colleagues (2008) found that the best predictor of gains in academic outcomes for preschoolers was high quality instruction and close teacher-child relationships. Hamre and Pianta (2001) found that children’s relationships with their kindergarten teachers predicted academic and behavioral outcomes through eighth grade. Combining scores on conflict and dependency scales into a variable they called relational negativity, they found that, “Particularly for boys, kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of conflict and overdependency were significantly correlated with academic outcomes throughout elementary and middle school” (p. 634). Their results also suggested that the quality of teacher-child relationships may be more important for children at higher risk for later problems than those at lower risk. Relational negativity strongly predicted work habit marks (i.e., listening, participation, compliance, cooperation, study habits) in lower elementary school, \( r (178) = -.52, p < .001 \), and upper elementary school, \( r (178) = .34, p < .01 \), for students in the top third of teacher behavior problem ratings. Teacher-child conflicts are also related to school avoidance, declines in prosocial behavior, and higher levels of peer perceived aggression (Birch & Ladd, 1997).
Halvorsen, Lee, and Andrade (2009) examined teachers’ attitudes toward teaching children from low-income backgrounds and their willingness to take responsibility for student learning. They described responsibility as “the willingness of teachers to take responsibility for all their students’ learning and to accept that students’ success or failure is attributable to the quality of teaching, rather than to outside determinants, including the students” (p. 183). Using a mixed method approach that combined both qualitative and quantitative data sources, Halvorsen and colleagues (2009) studied kindergarten and first grade teachers in low-income schools. The qualitative dimension was based on interviews with peers and supervisors. Teachers were considered “highly responsible” if they were ranked high on “enjoyment of teaching” and “making a difference in the lives of children” and low on “factors interfering with teaching.” The quantitative dimension of their study used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten cohort (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Teachers’ feelings of high, medium, or low levels of responsibility were related to factors, such as sense of collective responsibility, teaching experience, teacher preparation, conference attendance, perception of administrative support, and teacher control over school policy and curriculum. Halvorsen and colleagues (2009) summarized their quantitative findings, which were entirely consistent with their qualitative data, as follows:

Early elementary teachers with high levels of responsibility demonstrate the following characteristics of professional dedication: more preparation time, more frequent attendance at early childhood conferences, and a more general propensity for improving their own learning. Responsibility is also associated with teachers feeling empowered to influence both policy and curriculum. Highly responsible teachers also report they are supported by their principals.

Our most important finding is that at low income, public schools, responsibility positively influences how much children progress in reading from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of first grade, both individually and collectively (pp. 210-211)

Wentzel (2003) investigated the extent to which parent socialization models could be used to explain the impact of teachers on student attitudinal, behavioral, and academic outcomes. Looking at teaching through the parenting dimensions of control, maturity demands, democratic communication, and nurturance, Wentzel found high expectations (maturity demands) to consistently predict student goals and interests, while negative feedback (lack of nurturance) was a consistent negative predictor of academic achievement and social behavior. These findings suggest that good teachers may mirror the behavioral styles of good parents. The work of Mandara (2006), who reviewed research on effective strategies for the socialization of young African American boys, is worth noting here. He found that a uniquely African American authoritiveness (warmth and control) and a proactive racial socialization are clearly effective parenting practices for young African American boys, thus raising the potential of the socialization practices of effective African American parents as a source for effective teaching.

Acquisition of Early Literacy and School Readiness Skills

Both school readiness and early literacy are indicators of a “good start” for early school success (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Supporting, enriching, and enhancing school readiness and early literacy development are crucial to a child’s long-term educational success. School readiness for four-year-olds is being able to stay on task, engage in acceptable behavior in the classroom, interact well with peers, and manifest emerging literacy skills. For children in high poverty areas, these skills have been linked to their attending high quality preschool programs. Educational environments that support early literacy and quality instruction are important for all children. Unfortunately, children from economically disadvantaged, primarily minority status groups comprise the larger proportion of those students placed at-risk for problems in the area of literacy success in today’s mainstream schools. Low levels of literacy are associated with a range of long-term social problems, including unemployment and delinquency (ProLiteracy Worldwide, 2003).
For young African American males a major indicator of their acquisition of early literacy skills is their reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP reading scores for African American male fourth graders are the lowest of any of the tested subgroups (Lee, Grigg & Donahue, 2007). The literacy level of young African American boys has become a critical indicator of what is likely to transpire in the future. There is evidence that early elementary school literacy levels predict high school literacy (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Research also suggests that reading problems are related to certain kinds of emotional problems in low income school age children (Ackerman, Izard, Kobak, Brown, & Smith, 2007). Gee (2001) suggested a sociocultural perspective on literacy acquisition that recommends situating the reading problems of young African American boys within their unique social, cultural, and historical contexts. This kind of approach would require that the issue of literacy for young African American boys be approached from broader political and economic perspectives. Former Assistant Secretary of Education Grover “Ruth” Whitehurst, in response to a question about the relationship between reading scores and incarceration, reflects the need for this kind of broader perspective. Whitehurst said,

... if you look at the proportion of middle schoolers who are not at the basic level, who are really behind in reading, it is a very strong predictor of problems with the law and the need for jails down the line. Literacy for societies, literacy for states, literacy for individuals is a powerful determinant of success. The opposite of success is failure and clearly, being in jail is a sign of failure. . . . What goes into law enforcement issues and jails, all the rest, under-employment, unemployment insurance, the need to support women and children who are not employed—all of these issues are connected to literacy and education. Presumably the cost for these programs would go down substantially in concert with increasing levels of literacy and education attainment. (Boulton, n.d., p. 1)

CURRICULUM QUALITY AND RELEVANCE

Curriculum quality and relevance in the context of early childhood education for young African American boys involves issues of developmental appropriateness, cultural relevance, and the ability of a program to meet a child’s individual needs. More recently, the issue of developmental appropriateness has been extended to examinations of the level of physical activity experienced by preschoolers. Brown and colleagues (2009) examined physical activity levels for a sample of preschoolers (55% African American and 50% male) from a range of early childhood programs that included commercial child-care centers, church-affiliated preschools, and Head Start programs. They found that the preschool day is basically sedentary with 89% of coded behaviors being characterized as sit/squat, lie down, or stand. Only 8% of behaviors were coded as light physical activity and 3% as vigorous activity. Also, children in higher quality preschool programs have higher levels of vigorous physical activity than those considered lower quality (Dowda, Pate, Trost, Almeida, & Sirand, 2004).

The relationship between physical activity and program quality is particularly troubling with regard to the experiences of African American boys in preschool settings. The work of Bailey and Boykin (2001) suggested that African American children prefer learning environments characterized by “verve” or a preference for movement, stimulus variability, and physical stimulation. This is a preference that is rooted in an “Afro-cultural ethos” that characterizes most African American homes (Bailey & Boykin, 2001). For boys, the lack of vigorous physical activity may be more debilitating since preschool boys tend to have generally higher activity levels than girls (Finn, Johannsen, & Specker, 2002).

Connor and colleagues (2009) examined the role of individualizing instruction in the literacy development of first graders. They compared rates of literacy skill growth in children from high poverty schools taught by teachers specially trained to individualize literacy instruction with results from a control group. They were particularly interested in examining the impact of code-focused instruction (i.e., a focus on decoding, phonics, alphabet activities) versus meaning-focused activities designed to extract and construct meaning from text (i.e., reading aloud, independent reading, writing, vocabulary, comprehension activities). Their results showed that student growth
in literacy is related to the nature of individualized prescriptions for specific kinds of instruction over the course of the year. Depending on their ability levels, students need varying amounts of teacher/child managed, child managed, and peer and child managed instructional activities. A main effect emerged from meaning-focused, teacher/child managed. Connor and colleagues (2009) noted that this finding “indicates that meaning-focused instructional activities, such as reading with children and explicitly teaching comprehension strategies, had a positive effect on students’ reading skill gains regardless of whether they had strong or weak reading skills” (p. 94).

Teaching young African American boys to be proficient in reading is one of the greatest challenges facing the early childhood education community. First grade traditionally is the setting where readiness skills are consolidated and more formal reading instruction begins. However, just as the quality of preschool programs has been found to be substandard in low-income areas, so also has the quality of first grade. Stuhlman and Pianta (2009) found a higher proportion of low-quality first grade classrooms serving low-income children and a corresponding higher proportion of high-quality first grade classrooms serving middle-income children. They posited “children who may be at greatest risk for difficulties in early grades, due to poor pre-academic skills or demographic factors, are the least likely to be enrolled in high opportunity classrooms and are more likely to be enrolled in classrooms with the lowest quality” (p. 339). As young African American boys transition from preschool to kindergarten to first grade, their struggles continue. While they should be establishing a firm foundation for later success, in reality they are moving further into the quagmire that is the preschool to prison pipeline.

IMPLICATIONS—TOWARD REFINING THE QUALITY DIMENSION FOR YOUNG AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The perspectives on what constitutes quality in early childhood education are varied and multidimensional. However, these perspectives and attempts at definition focus on what is considered “high quality” for young children in general, rather than what may be “high quality” for any specific group of children. It is a “one size fits all” approach that suggests what is good for “most” is best for each and every subgroup of children. For young African American boys, however, the unique historical and sociocultural forces that continue to place them at risk for school failure (and its consequences) require a more refined and “group specific” definition of “high quality” early childhood education. Therefore, the following indicators of quality should be addressed when assessing early childhood programs (preschool and early elementary) for young African American boys:

- A willingness on the part of teachers to take responsibility for the learning of all young African American boys (Halvorsen et al., 2009)
- Expectations for the success of young African American boys (Halvorsen et al., 2009)
- A willingness to highlight the assets of young African American boys (Boykin, 2000, Halvorsen et al., 2009)
- A recognition that warmth and control are dimensions of effective socialization for young African American boys (Mandara, 2006)
- A willingness to engage in a proactive racial socialization of young African American boys (Mandara, 2006)
- A willingness to engage young African American boys in early literacy activities that includes individualization (Conner et al., 2009)
- A recognition that high levels of vigorous activity (Dowda et al., 2004), especially activities rooted in their culture (Bailey & Boykin, 2001), are good for young African American boys

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Young African American boys are placed at risk by the very nature of preschool and early childhood settings that should promote their development. Issues of teacher responsiveness, program quality, and developmental appropriateness must be examined specifically as they relate to outcomes for young African American boys. Communities and the policymakers that represent them must prioritize the provision of truly high quality early childhood education to African American boys. Toward that objective the following recommendations are offered:
• The status of young African American boys in early childhood settings must become a priority for varied segments of the African American community. Community based organizations, parent groups, and religious communities will need to coalesce around the question “what is happening to young African American boys in preschools and the early elementary grades?” Policy forums and research-based seminars can serve as starting points for the development of action plans and programmatic initiatives.

• Policymakers and politicians must go beyond simply advocating the full funding of Head Start, and begin to advocate funding for a broad range of services in early childhood programs in high poverty communities. These services include expanding early literacy training for parents and preschool teachers, mental health consultation services for preschool and early elementary teachers, and professional development activities that focus on creating high quality programs that address the needs of African American boys.

• Charter schools for African American boys (pre-K through third grade) focused on early literacy should be developed by nonprofit organizations and community groups. These schools should partner with culturally competent university researchers to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting early literacy acquisition. Concerted efforts should be made to recruit African American males to teach in these schools.

• Public schools must be encouraged to establish more all male classrooms in the early elementary grades. As part of this initiative, curriculum materials that reflect the interests (e.g., hip hop, sports) of young African American boys should be developed, field-tested, implemented, and evaluated.

• Professional development opportunities for ALL teachers of young African American boys should be developed with a focus on asset-based education, learning style preferences, and curriculum relevance. Organizations, such as the National Black Child Development Institute and the National Alliance of Black School Educators, should work closely with colleges and universities to develop distance learning opportunities that focus on African American child development.

• Public awareness campaigns should be initiated that highlight problems and offer solutions related to young African American boys in preschool and early elementary settings. These campaigns should utilize various forms of media (print, radio, television) and focus on issues, such as teacher expectations and behaviors, curriculum relevance, and the importance of parental involvement. African American celebrities and media personalities should be encouraged to participate in these campaigns.

• There should be continued advocacy for the development of programs to recruit African American males into teaching in early childhood settings, including scholarships, loan forgiveness, and alternative certification programs. The stigma around men teaching young children must be confronted and eradicated.

Critical issues, such as educational attainment, employment, incarceration, and parenting have their roots in the early experiences of young African American boys. Success for African American males is framed by the educational contexts in which they are immersed. We must lay the foundation for that success in the nation’s preschool and early childhood classrooms.

REFERENCES


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