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Black Boyhood Just Don't Stop

A Reflection on the Necessity of Meaningful Boyhoods

by Mike Browne and Amir Asim Gilmore

To the K-5 admin that saw our Blackness as “uncontrollable.” Sorry, but we refused to have adults police our mind, body, and spirits.

To the high school teachers that called us “dumb.” Sorry, but we refused to have our brilliance dimmed by the boxes you wanted us placed in.

And to the society today that deems us “hyperactive.” Sorry, but we refuse to let the boyhood joy in our souls be contained.

The violence levied against us during our lives serves as a constant reminder that we must love and honor the Black boyhood within, in order to be the best adult version of ourselves.

— Mike and Amir

As Black male educators deeply committed to Black boys’ joy, brilliance, resilience, and educational well-being, we have spent an abundance of time working with, speaking on, and theorizing about boys.

Boy. While it is one word, its fluidity and signification vary depending upon its context. At times, using “boy” can

be polarizing because, on one hand, it can signify a term of endearment in male nonfamilial relationships (e.g., ‘that’s my boy’) and on the other hand, it can be jarring because of its historical connotations of Black male subordination. Speaking about boys is not the same as speaking about the social phenomenon of boyhood. Within many educational contexts, boyhood embodies a way of being in the world—a developmental life phase before manhood—encapsulated by joy, leisure, inquiry, creativity, and innocence. All Black boys need meaningful boyhoods, because this period is critical to cultivating and sustaining their well-being, joy, and futurity. However, in a country infatuated with the social ritual of mitigating boyhood (e.g., ‘man up!’) and transitioning (Black) boys to men, the quintessential question is, at what age does boyhood stop? Is it when boys hit puberty? Learn to drive? Vote? Become employed? Go to college? At 25, when their brain is fully developed?

We are here to evoke and echo Michael Dumas and Joseph Nelson’s (2016) sentiments that Black boyhood never stops. Their transformative article



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on (re)imagining Black boyhoods in educational spaces and beyond is a paradigm shift and a point of inquiry for Black men of all ages to deepen their boyhood meaning-making. Boyhood is not monolithic—it does not stop nor die—because it exists beyond the static notions of time and childhood development. Unbounded from traditional life phases, Black boyhoods exist for Black men in the present and flow throughout their lives as a spiritual guide and a profound source of knowledge. Therefore, even as Black men, our boyhood experiences and memories—the good, the bad, and the ugly—are always with us, continuously shaping our creativity, curiosities, pursuits, passions, and understandings about the world. Further, the (dis)possession of the agency, leisure, and joy that Black boys experience within social institutions—such as schools—dramatically affects their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and inferred social mattering.

As cultural gatekeepers, this is paramount for non-Black educators to understand, because they have a critical role in shaping Black boys' experiences, memories, futurity, and social mattering. Far too many educators, schooling environments, and educational organizations have doused the flame of Black joy, smothered Black boys' quality of being, and then wondered who is to blame. What educators see within Black boys is what they produce out of them, meaning that Black boys' joys, imaginations, self-conceptions, and academic aspirations hinge on how their racialized and gendered identities are valued in schools.

In essence, Black boys cannot *be*, and are often rendered illegible, because they are viewed by educators' restrictive imaginations of them. As Black educators who have learned, worked, engaged, existed, and survived within

an education system that intentionally does not love nor embrace Blackness, we have borne witness to Black boys' educational marginalization. Consequently, our intentions in writing this article are twofold: (1) to illuminate Black boys' precarious position and Black boyhood's troubled social conception, and (2) to offer a call to action to non-Black educators to reimagine Black boyhoods.

Black Boyhood Interrupted

Got a high tolerance when your age don't exist.

— Kendrick Lamar (2011), *Section.80*

Contemporary discussions of what it means to be a boy, and who can embody boyhood, appear common sense to most adults and educators. However, in this country, how long your childhood lasts—its elasticity—varies wildly based on one's race and gender. Black boyhoods remain a mere footnote within educational research and policy and school practice, because there is an institutional unwillingness to value the composite of their lives. Black boys' boyhood experiences fundamentally alter our societal understandings of the elasticity between a (white) boy and a man. They occupy a precarious and tenuous position in education and society because of how they are seen, imagined, and pathologized due to adultification.

Adultification is a dehumanizing social phenomenon in which Black children are dispossessed of their status as children and their right to a childhood. Adultification makes Black children vulnerable to age compression, meaning that Black boys' access to a healthy and meaningful boyhood is mitigated. Therefore, school-age Black boys are often not perceived as boys, but as men. In a research study by Goff, et al., (2014), findings

illuminated that by age 10, Black boys are misperceived as older and guilty of infractions. Instead of their actions and behaviors being perceived as immature or full of childish naïveté, Black boys' transgressions are seen as ill-willed, sinister, and fully-intentional. This racialized narrative is predicated on the public's assumptions that Black boys are a danger to public safety and are in urgent need of discipline. This is evident within educational spaces, as day-to-day practices of education and schooling fear Blackness.

As an apparatus of Black social control and protector of white middle-class norms, schools manage white stereotype-driven anxieties about Black boys through instruction, surveillance, conduct, and discipline. Therefore, Black boys' "Blackmaleness" becomes a curriculum—a literacy that is read, enforced, and policed within schools. Thus, when Black children enter (white) educational spaces, their existence, creativity, cultural knowledge, and value can be not only stymied, but the organizational arrangement of schools return their bodies and identities to them as illegible, inferior, and deficit. As a result, Black boys struggle with dissociating their identities from the racist criminalized constructions (e.g., thug, ghetto, delinquent) scripted onto them.

In this country, being a Black boy is the crime. "You should have known better," coupled with "no excuses," and "zero-tolerance" are rhetorics of responsibility that Black boys frequently hear from educators, police officers, politicians, and media pundits. Pathologized as deviant, adult-like culpable criminals, Black boys are constantly surveilled and robbed of what makes childhood distinct: their joy, play, leisure, and innocence. Consequently, they become ensnared by myriad forms of violence that have devastating emotional and

psychospiritual effects on their growth. Afforded neither the privilege of innocence nor leniency like their white peers, Black boys can face steep penalties while learning from their missteps, as they are directed into the school-to-prison pipeline or face situations that cost them their lives.

When 12-year-old Tamir Rice was killed by Cleveland police for playing at a local park with a toy gun, the responding officers stated that they believed Rice was older, due to his physical size. Rice was never asked questions. 17-year-old Jordan Davis was never asked questions before he was killed by Michael Dunn, who fired 10 shots into a Dodge Durango because he felt threatened by the loud rap music coming from the SUV. 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was never asked questions as he was criminally profiled and killed by then-neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman. As Black men, we meditate about the Black boys growing up in this generation and beyond, as these violent confrontations critically shape their understanding of their place within the world. What does a Black boy explicitly and implicitly learn about their role in society when perceived as a criminal? What are they unable to learn or process because violence and death shadow them? What can they look forward to in the future as Black men?

In the wake of spectacularized and mundane acts of school surveillance and criminalization, police brutality, and anti-Black vigilante violence, our society quickly forgets that the victims are adultified boys, denied the ability to play, be silly, or make mistakes. Their ability to sustain their joy and envision their future is mitigated. Oscillating between boy-not and man-not, Black boys' marginalization is not a distant past phenomenon, but a continued marker of the present.

A Call to Action: Black Boys Deserve More

As we close, you might be curious to understand how two Black men who have been pathologized and maligned throughout the preK-12 schooling journey are able to center their joys as educators. Answer: our boyhood has never stopped. Our passions, creative expressions, and quirky, yet silly natures have remained with us. We center our joys by turning inward toward our boyhood knowledge as a point of inquiry, to guide us toward social justice. What kind of educators were and were not needed while we were growing up? Which pedagogical approaches cultivated and sustained our mattering? What structures imposed upon us need to be dismantled? We turn toward our boyhoods because they make us stay curious, stay wondering, and stay playing within the world. Nothing fulfills us more than being able to support Black boys' joys today, so they can envision themselves tomorrow. However, we cannot do this alone.

Therefore, we are calling on all non-Black educators to (re)commit to protecting Black boys, by critically reimagining Black boyhoods in schools and communities. Black boys remain vulnerable to racist and inequitable discipline practices within schools and society because of how Black masculinities are (mis)read through U.S. popular culture and public policy. To teach, learn, and disrupt these restrictive imaginations in educational spaces, educators must commit careful attention to oppressive discourses levied against Black boys' minds, bodies, and spirits at the particular intersection of race, gender, and age. Black boys deserve more than the culmination of fears that they are uneducable, uncontrollable, aggressive, and hyperactive super-predators.

Indeed, Black boys deserve meaningful and robust boyhoods, full of joy, wonderment, leisure, and play. They deserve teachers and administrators who will refuse to enforce policies that denigrate their identities. They deserve to freely explore their identities beyond white and rigid gender norms. By critically reimagining Black boyhoods in schools and communities, educators can: (1) create transformative spaces where Black boys' actions and emotions are not perceived as threatening, (2) inspire Black boys to inquire, play, and explore new ideas, and (3) create space for gay, trans, gender-nonconforming, queer, and questioning boys, by dismantling essentialized, static, and deficit tropes of Black masculinities. As educators committed to cultivating culturally sustaining educational environments for Black boys, we must strive to meet this moment and champion spaces that value them in all their beauty and brilliance.

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