

From “Problems” to “Vulnerable Resources:” Reconceptualizing Black Boys With and Without Disability Labels in U.S. Urban Schools

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Abstract

In this article, I propose a critical, alternative framing of Black boys, asserting that Black boys are vulnerable resources rather than problems. Black boys are susceptible to racist and ableist practices and discourses, and they deserve special protection and services in school that do not position them as “in need of repair.” Despite the multiple oppressions they face, Black boys are assets to themselves and their communities. I contrast this alternative framing against an existing framing of schooling for Black boys: the dominant, functionalist approach that advances a deficiency narrative. I situate this discussion within the context of urban education.

Keywords: Black males, urban education, special education, race, gender

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“Suspend him for a week!” “Get him evaluated!” “Place him in special ed.!” These comments seem harsh and unforgiving. They reflect only a sliver of the advice teachers, principals, social workers, speech language therapists, and school psychologists exchange with regard to the education of Black boys. In the United States (U.S.), schools, tasked with providing safe and generative learning environments for Black boys, often treat Black boys as problems. Schools subject Black boys to harsh discipline, remedial practices, and academic exclusion. School leaders rarely investigate the cultural-historical contexts in which Black boys construct their identities. Seldom do school leaders recognize and tap into Black boys’ humanity and the assets they bring to school.

In this article, I explore how schools have positioned Black boys with and without disability labels as problems within the context of urban education. I focus on the “how” because in order to improve schooling for Black boys, school leaders must understand the specific mechanisms that frame Black boys as deficient. I also propose a critical, alternative framing of Black boys, asserting that Black boys are vulnerable resources rather than problems. Black boys are susceptible to racist and ableist practices and discourses, and they deserve special protection and services in school that do not position them as “in need of repair.” Despite the multiple oppressions they face, Black boys are assets to themselves and their communities. Educational leaders should listen to and work with Black boys to improve Black boys’ schooling experiences in local contexts.

Schools are often bastions of trauma for Black boys with and without disability labels. This is especially true for urban schools, whose teachers educate a disproportionate share of the country's Black students (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017) but employ a mostly White, mostly female, general and special education teaching staff (Kozleski et al., 2014). Urban schools include schools situated in major metropolitan cities with 1,000,000 people or more (e.g., New York City and Chicago) and those in large cities with fewer than 1,000,000 people. They also include schools that are not located in big cities but are in the early stages of experiencing challenges associated with the contexts of larger cities (e.g., poverty, environmental pollution, and inadequate school funding) (Milner, 2012b).

For many urban communities, intersecting race and class oppression is integral to their histories (Soss & Weaver, 2017). For instance, macroeconomic policies such as the low federal minimum wage and policies that inhibit union organizing disproportionately keep Black families in poverty (Anyon, 2005). Additionally, housing policies concentrate poverty by maintaining racial and economic segregation (Anyon, 2005). One implication of such policies is that urban schools are often under-resourced as they are funded largely through *local* property taxes (Oates & Fischel, 2016). Despite these challenges, urban communities are culturally rich and resilient (Kelly, 2010; Utsey et al., 2007; Walker, 2000). Utsey and colleagues (2007) investigated the role of culture-specific coping in regard to resilient outcomes in African Americans from urban communities deemed high-risk. The researchers found culture-specific factors (i.e., spiritual and collective coping) predicted resilient outcomes. Moreover, scholars of Black education during racial segregation revealed that, despite scarce funding and resources, segregated urban Black schools provided Black students with an education valued by teachers, parents, and the students

themselves (Kelly, 2010; Walker, 2000). Student and teacher success hinged on the collaborative work of principals, parents, churches, and civic organizations (Walker, 2013a; Walker, 2013b).

Historically, urban education researchers have treated the education of Black students with and without disability labels as separate issues. Researchers have expanded considerably the field's understanding of the challenges and opportunities afforded to Black students without disability labels. Scholars have paid less attention to the lived realities of Black students labeled disabled and placed in special education (Blanchett, 2014). This lack of attention may be because urban education researchers are cautious about positioning Black students through a deficit model, a perspective not traditionally reflected within the special education community (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Relatedly, urban education scholars may fear engaging with the construct of disability due to the country's legacy of oppressing Black Americans on account of their race and perceived ability (Bailey & Mobley, 2019).

The placement of Black students in special education has been a contentious issue since the inception of special education in the 1970s. While special education was created to provide inclusive services to a group of students who were historically excluded from the public education system (i.e., students with disabilities), that equity agenda was compromised by the system's inability to contend with race. Black families recognized quickly the dangers of special education for their children. For example, in 1971, the *Larry P. v. Riles* case was filed against the state of California. Plaintiffs, representing African American parents, argued that culturally biased IQ tests resulted in the overrepresentation of African American children in mental retardation programs and, as a result, African American students were placed in segregated classrooms and denied access to the general education curriculum (Blanchett et al., 2009). The system's understanding of Black children as intellectually disabled was at odds with how parents

saw their children, so parents challenged the district's misconstruction. Ultimately, the Court agreed with the plaintiffs and banned the use of IQ tests for the placement of African Americans in mental retardation programs. These early tensions foreshadowed a continuous struggle between Black families and the special education system. To this day, disproportionality remains a problem (Skiba et al., 2016). The over *and* underrepresentation of Black students in special education reflect a two-tiered system in which students with race and class privilege (e.g., those from middle-class, White families) are provided with opportunities and resources to lead successful lives while race- and class-oppressed students (e.g., those from low-income, Black families) are provided limited access to high-quality resources and opportunities to learn (Saatcioglu & Skrtic, 2019).

Black Americans' history of being deemed incapable extends beyond the context of education. Consider that the enslavement of Africans was justified on the grounds that Black people were regarded as less intelligent and human than other racial groups. Also consider that the maintenance of slavery was dependent, in part, on the disabling of Black bodies. White slave masters mutilated Black bodies through whipping, branding, and other forms of physical violence to break the spirit of the enslaved and establish a culture in which the disfigured and disabled Black body represented a dehumanized commodity, worthy only of continued exploitation in a colonialist, capitalist system (Erevelles, 2014). These intersecting racist and ableist logics flowed into the 20th century, serving as the foundation for Jim Crow. Under Jim Crow, Black people experienced segregation and racial and economic violence because some White Americans viewed Black people as intrinsically inferior and, thus, deserving of maltreatment (Alexander, 2012).

Given Black Americans' history at the intersection of racism and ableism, it is understandable why some urban education researchers may be cautious about diving into discourse around disability and special education as it pertains to Black students (Milner, 2012a). However, such a plunge is necessary. The intersection of race and disability is very much a matter of urban education (Annamma et al., 2013; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Urban educators are responsible for educating *all* students, with and without disability labels. Of the students labeled with disabilities, Black students comprise a disproportionate share (Skiba et al., 2016). Further, leaders in urban education cannot advance equity for all Black students if the voices and experiences of Black students labeled with disabilities are excluded from the conversation.

Black students labeled with disabilities and placed in special education have an experience of the world that differs from their counterparts without disability labels. While all Black students are at risk of encountering racism and ableism, existing as a Black student with a disability label can be especially challenging as disability labeling produces stigma. Using longitudinal data on 11,740 adolescents and their schools, Shifrer (2013) investigated if stigma mediated parents' and teachers' educational expectations for students labeled with learning disability (LD). She determined parents and teachers were more likely to perceive disabilities in and have lower expectations for labeled students than non-labeled students who exhibited similar behavior and academic achievement. Understanding how Black students with disability labels make sense of their raced and disabled realities can inform equity missions for the better. As such, it is imperative that urban education researchers broaden their scope to illuminate the concerns and experiences of Black students labeled with disabilities in addition to those of their peers without disability labels.

Urban and suburban schools fail Black boys in general *and* special education (Marsh & Noguera, 2018; Mayes, 2018). For instance, Black boys with and without disability labels are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary punishment (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019). During the 2015-16 school year, Black boys represented eight percent of the total student population but comprised 25% of those suspended from school (Office for Civil Rights, 2019). Black boys are also placed in more restrictive environments than their White counterparts (National Council on Disability, 2018) and consistently overrepresented in the disability categories of emotional disturbance (ED) and LD (Zhang et al., 2014). Of the many youth with disabilities incarcerated in juvenile facilities, those labeled with ED and LD comprise a majority of the population (Mallett, 2017). Exclusionary practices such as suspension and placement in segregated educational settings often deny Black boys quality opportunities to learn, build robust and diverse peer relationships, and procure the essential tools for lifelong learning (Kozleski et al., 2015).

Local narratives revealed Black boys labeled as academically challenged experienced public insults and reprimand from teachers and were taught their dreams could not become realities (Marsh & Noguera, 2018). Additionally, Mayes (2018) found Black boys labeled as both gifted and disabled (due to traumatic brain injury) were refused legally mandated accommodations. Teachers told students “get over it,” “it’s not that bad,” when the students expressed feelings of pain.

By any measure, most schools are dysfunctional spaces for Black boys. The education system neither values nor protects them. Reforming the system to support all Black boys requires a reconceptualization of dysfunctional schooling for Black boys. Reconceptualization requires

merging the disciplines of urban and special education to consider the experiences and perspectives of Black boys with and without disability labels (Blanchett, 2014).

In this article, I explore two divergent framings of schooling for Black boys in the U.S.: (a) the dominant, functionalist approach and (b) a critical view. The functionalist view promotes school organizations as rational and orderly and school failure as pathological (i.e., located within students). The critical view foregrounds the distribution and exercise of power within society, indexing the ways in which power corrupts the design and performance of what passes as education. It also seeks to advance emancipation for historically oppressed groups (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2010). In the first part of this article, I discuss how functionalist education (Skrtic, 1995) has historically framed Black boys as deficient (Howard, 2013). I argue that functionalist education practices and discourses (Skrtic, 1995) have colluded with White supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and anti-Blackness (Dumas & ross, 2016) to position Black boys as deficient in public schools after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Consequently, Black boys are held responsible for their own failure in school, and their histories, cultures, and voices remain marginalized.

In the second section, I “reimagine Black boyhood” (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 27) and offer an alternative, anti-deficit framing of Black boys (Harper; 2010; Howard, 2013). This alternative framing reflects a critical view of schooling for Black boys. I posit that Black boys with and without disability labels are not problems deserving of punishment, exclusion, and remediation. Rather, they are vulnerable resources whose voices, experiences, and abilities can and should be embraced by the education system to improve Black boys’ educational journeys. This reconceptualization of Black boys is only one of many radical reimaginings; it is not meant to restrict how Black boys are understood and theorized. I also draw from the voiced

perspectives of Black boys, who were participants in two prior studies (Banks, 2017; McGee & Pearman, 2015), to provide evidence for Black boys' experiences being vulnerable resources.

Before I delve into the two framings, I unpack Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit), the theoretical framework that I use to ground this analysis (Annamma et al., 2013). I also define functionalist education, White supremacy, and anti-Blackness. These definitions help to clarify the larger sociocultural processes that facilitate the construction of Black boys as problems.

DisCrit: Theorizing at the Intersection of Race and Ability/Disability

I use DisCrit to ground my analysis of the experiences of Black boys with and without disability labels in urban schools (Annamma et al., 2013). DisCrit is a shared branch of critical race theory (CRT) and disability studies (DS). Annamma and colleagues (2013) conceptualized DisCrit to address the tensions that existed between the two fields. They recognized limited attention was given to issues of disability and special education within the field of CRT. Similarly, they observed that few scholars in the DS community made race and racism a topic of discussion. DisCrit is a framework for studying race, disability, and their intersections in society. DisCrit seeks to expose how and the extent to which racism and ableism permeate every aspect of society, including social institutions (especially the education system), human interactions, and discourse. DisCrit is particularly concerned with how individuals experience oppression at the intersection of race, ability/disability, and other socially constructed identities.

DisCrit can be used as a tool for emancipation. It allows for a critique of existing oppressive systems and the imagination of new, liberatory ones. I use DisCrit to reveal how Black boys are positioned as problems in school. Specifically, I employ DisCrit to explore how racist and ableist constructions of Black males are taken up by school personnel and used—in

conjunction with functionalist education practices—to oppress Black boys. I also use DisCrit to reconceptualize Black boys with and without disability labels as vulnerable resources.

Defining Functionalist Education, White Supremacy, and Anti-Blackness

The U.S. education system is an example of a functionalist system. In the education system, knowledge is often treated as an objective understanding of a single reality in which constructs are organized hierarchically (Skrtic, 1991). In many instances, teachers organize objective facts about the world in the most efficient way possible for presentation, retention, and test performance (Au, 2011). Behavior is subjected to a similar, hierarchical format that focuses on a control mentality. Conforming behavior that defers to authority and strives for the internalization of sets of behavioral performance is elevated over the development of altruism, community building, and respect for human variance (Noguera, 2003a). Teachers learn to use a system of rewards and punishments that produce conforming outcomes and suppress expression (Morris & Perry, 2016). Additionally, functionalist schools use standardized, culturally weighted ability and knowledge tests (e.g., statewide annual assessment and IQ tests; Sternberg, 2018) to sort and track students so that teachers can efficiently provide instruction (Domina et al., 2017; Skrtic, 1991). These assessments typically privilege the cultural knowledge and practices of members from the dominant group while ignoring the cultural knowledge and practices of those from historically marginalized backgrounds (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2010; Milner, 2012a). Members of the dominant group are White people, particularly those who value and uphold Whiteness, cisgenderism, middle-classness, heterosexuality, patriarchy, able-bodiedness, Christianity, and English as the normative center to which all else is compared (Leonardo & Manning, 2017).

Functionalist schools are organized and managed according to the logic of a machine bureaucracy, that is, a system that sustains itself via continued “standardization of work processes and outcomes; specification of professional roles and student classifications; and close supervision of personnel and clients” (Skrtic, 1995, p. 73). Of all the community members present in a school building, students are most susceptible to the consequences of this logic. To illustrate: when a student arrives to school, educators and other professionals will attempt to match that student’s needs to a pre-existing and standardized set of models, practices, and tools (e.g., they may place that child in what the institution terms the *general education* classroom). All will be well if those models, practices, and tools can accommodate the student. However, if there is a significant mismatch between the student’s needs and the established, standardized norm, the school will frame the child rather than the system as the problem and will address the problem (i.e., the child) by creating a segregated space or program within or outside the school in which to educate the child (Erevelles, 2014). Eventually, that program or space will become standardized with its own set of models, practices, and tools. Further, the school may wield exclusionary discipline to push the child out of school or employ punitive practices to keep the child “in line” within the building (Hines & Wilmot, 2018).

Whiteness is a social concept that includes the cultural-historical practices and values of White people in addition to the phenotypic characteristics associated with the socially constructed White race (Leonardo & Manning, 2017). In the U.S., Whiteness is the unmarked norm to which all else is measured. To possess Whiteness is to hold the “ultimate property” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58) as it provides one with abundant social, cultural, legal, political, and economic privileges (Dixson & Rousseau Anderson, 2018). White supremacy is a centuries-old, global racist system that shapes every major realm of human activity: the social,

the cultural, the legal, the political, and the economic (Leonardo & Manning, 2017; Rabaka, 2007). White supremacy entails White domination and the subordination of that which is deemed non-White (Gillborn, 2006; Leonardo & Manning, 2017)—including non-White people (e.g., individuals of African and Asian descent)—and it manifests at both the macro level (institutions and systems) and micro level (individual human interactions) (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015).

Historically, some White Americans have placed Blackness and those who possess it in polar opposition to Whiteness—that which is considered pure, humane, and good (Dumas & ross, 2016). Thus, anti-Blackness refers to the construction and treatment of Blackness (i.e., the cultural-historical practices and values of Black people in addition to the phenotypic characteristics associated with the socially constructed Black race) in dehumanizing ways. Anti-Black racism is the dominant form of racism in the U.S. and has been used by powerful Whites and their racist allies to oppress Black Americans (Dumas & ross, 2016).

Black Boys as Problems

“How does it feel to be a problem?” was the question introduced by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) in chapter one of his piece, *The Souls of Black Folk*. This was the question, Du Bois claimed, that White Americans continually asked Black Americans as they bore the reality of Black folks’ newfound freedom after the Civil War. On its own, the question is grave and consequential, presupposing Black Americans are, in fact, a problem. However, what was particularly insidious was the indirect way in which White people posed the question. “All flutter[ed] round it instead of [asking it] directly” (Du Bois, 1903). Only through an examination of their actions, specifically their treatment of Black Americans, could Du Bois capture some White Americans’ true conviction: their belief that Black people were a stain on the fabric of the nation.

Today, Black boys enrolled in schools are still faced with that enduring yet “ever unasked” question, *how does it feel to be a problem?* (Du Bois, 1903; Howard; 2013). Following Du Bois, I defend the claim that, by their existence, Black boys are preordained as problems. My evidence emerges from examining the hegemonic educational practices and discourses weaponized against Black children, especially Black boys with and without disability labels. Specifically, I focus on the intersection of functionalist education practices and discourses, White supremacy, and anti-Blackness. Moreover, I bring attention to the professionals responsible for devaluing the lives of Black boys. I do this to highlight that, although the positioning of Black boys as problems is a systemic issue, street-level actors such as teachers, social workers, speech language therapists, school psychologists, and principals are largely responsible for maintaining harmful systems via their day-to-day work activities (Lipsky, 1980). Before describing the construction of Black boys as deficient in schools post *Brown*, I begin this section by briefly discussing representations of Black males in the U.S. prior to school desegregation. This context is essential for understanding why Black boys are framed as problems in contemporary times.

White Supremacist Representations of Black Males Before Integration

The U.S. was founded on the ideology and system of White supremacy (Tate, 1997), which has been maintained, in part, by the mistreatment of Black boys and men in society. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson (1954)—third president of the U.S., and owner of enslaved African Americans—described Black people as “in reason, much inferior [to Whites] and scarcely found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid” (p. 139). He believed Black people had a “greater degree of transpiration render[ing] them more tolerant of heat” (p. 139) and “required less sleep” (p. 139). Such racists and ableist ideas about the biology of Black people were used to justify the enslavement of Black boys, girls, men, and

women (Richardson, 2000). White men and women bought and sold Black people as commodities, forced them to perform unpaid manual labor, and brutalized their bodies in a number of ways (e.g., via rape, castration, and whipping) (Berlin, 2003; Jones-Rogers, 2019). Black boys and men have not only endured centuries of chattel slavery alongside their female counterparts, but they have also been subjected to additional forms of violence after Emancipation, including lynching (Wells-Barnett, 2014) and grotesque representations of themselves in film and literature (Bogle, 2001; Brown & Brown, 2015).

Many White people deemed Black Americans' post-Civil War demands for social and political equality as a threat to White supremacy and, consequently, a threat to their personal safety (Wood, 2018). They used lynching as one tool for re-establishing the racial order that existed before Emancipation (Defina & Hannon, 2011). The ritualistic lynching of Black men in particular, combined with the propagation of lynching through print media (e.g., photographs and postcards), created enduring images of "Black bestiality and White superiority" (Wood, 2018, p. 768). Lynching served as a visible representation of White dominance over the Black male body.

After slavery, the White-controlled film industry capitalized on adverse portrayals of Black males (Bogle, 2001). The industry depicted Black boys and men as toms, coons, and brutal Black bucks. Together, these stereotypes suggested Black males were traitors to their communities, shiftless buffoons, and violent, hypersexual brutes (Bogel, 2001). White Americans also relied on these stereotypes to shape the nation's understanding of Black boys and men through literature. The late 19th century witnessed the production of children's literature celebrating the destruction and ridicule of little Black boys depicted as coons. In stories like *Ten Little Niggers* and *A Coon Alphabet*, "one finds images of Black children with bugged-out eyes

and large lips and portrayed as victims to violence, sometimes even death” (Brown & Brown, 2015, p. 111). Oftentimes, the violence is self-inflicted.

Negative representations of Black males not only spilled into the post-Jim Crow era, but they also remain a facet of society’s collective consciousness (Brown, 2011). Unsurprisingly, these images are consequential for Black boys’ education. Teachers’ fears, biases, and stereotypes of Black males mediate how and the extent to which they interact with Black boys in school (Bryan, 2020; Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019).

Brown and Functionalist Education for Black Boys

Before *Brown v Board of Education*, one of the most pressing educational issues for Black Americans was the lack of resources provided to Black schools (Walker, 2000). Largely, Black proponents of *Brown* were less concerned about achieving school desegregation and more concerned about securing “equal educational resources across schools whether desegregated or not” (Milner et al., 2016, p. 26). When the Supreme Court issued its ruling in *Brown*, Black school leaders such as Horace Tate had hoped for schools “where the conditions for Blacks would be better after integration than they had been before” (Walker, 2009). While *Brown* did result in an expansion of educational opportunities for Black students, it also facilitated the placement of Black students into functionalist schools that were hostile toward Black children and intent on maintaining the hegemonic racial order.

Upon entering newly integrated functionalist schools, Black students were met with labeling and tracking (Milner et al., 2016). During the 1950s and 1960s, for example, urban schools fortified long-standing backstage organizational rules that removed unwanted students from general education classrooms and placed them in special classrooms and programs (Tropea, 1987). Black students were disproportionately subjected to these segregative practices as they

were considered academically and behaviorally disruptive to the normal working order (Tropea, 1987). The normal working order referred to a system rooted in “White, middle-class American experiences, values and expectations” (Ferri & Connor, 2005, p. 457). Schools across the nation used IQ tests and subjective evaluation to place students subjugated by poverty and racism into four disability categories explaining the students’ failure: (a) mentally retarded, (b) slow learner, (c) culturally deprived, and (d) emotionally disturbed (Sleeter, 1986). The first two categories, mentally retarded and slow learner, relied on culturally normed IQ testing and assessment of adaptive skills (Armour-Thomas, 1992). Children who scored below 70-75 on an IQ test were labeled mentally retarded while those who received a score between 75 and 90 were deemed slow learners (Sleeter, 2010). Conversely, professionals largely turned to their subjective understandings of the world, rather than standardized assessments, to determine if children were culturally deprived and emotionally disturbed. Deficit views of poor and racially minoritized people and neighborhoods as unstable, intellectually lazy, and devoid of the values necessary for academic and social success mediated their evaluations. Professionals assessed that learning challenges for poor and racially minoritized students stemmed from home and community failure (Sleeter, 2010).

Later, in 1975, the process of labeling and segregating students became reified through Public Law 94-142, the federal law mandating a free and appropriate education for children with disabilities (Connor & Ferri, 2005). The law, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), permitted school officials to diagnose students, assign disability labels, and consider the least restrictive environment (LRE) in which to educate students. Given that the LRE provision contained a continuum of placement options, educators were able to utilize the provision to legally undermine desegregation (Connor & Ferri, 2005). By the late 1980s, Black

students were disproportionately represented in special education and deposited in segregated programs for students with subjectively determined disabilities (e.g., mild mental retardation and serious emotional disturbances) (Artiles & Trent, 1994).

Today, Black boys are prime victims of the U.S.' racist, functionalist education system. Societal notions of Black males as unintelligent, threatening, and behaviorally challenging continue to infiltrate schools via school professionals (Ladson-Billings, 2011; Rowley et al., 2014). Consequently, Black boys routinely and disproportionately endure processes of marginalization, including suspension and placement in special education (Erevelles, 2014; Noguera, 2003b).

Several scholars (Collier & Bush, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Neal et al., 2003; Thomas et al., 2009) have documented teachers' deficit-based conceptualizations of Black boys. Collier and Bush (2012) conducted a qualitative study of elementary teachers' beliefs and perceptions about Black boys and observed instances of teachers describing Black boys as problems. For example, one teacher characterized the boys in her classroom as "lazy, loud, having attitude problems, and not taking responsibility for their actions" (p. 87). In another study (Neal et al., 2003), White middle school teachers perceived Black boys who walked through school in a style culturally associated with African Americans as lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and in greater need of special education services than students with walking styles associated with White Americans. Neal and colleagues' (2003) findings paralleled the results of earlier work by Kunjufu (1985), who documented how the "White female culture of schools" (Harry & Anderson, 1994, p. 610) interpreted Black boys' conversational style of "verbal volleying" as threatening and hostile. Research also suggests Black boys are at a greater risk of being viewed by teachers as overactive and aggressive if they overtly express feelings of anger,

even if their anger is a response to perceived acts of racism (Thomas et al., 2009). Further, describing her research experience in a high school, Ladson-Billings (2011) showed that the presence of Black boys is not even needed for negative ideas about Black boys to manifest:

Years later I went into a high school where I happened upon a middle-aged White male teacher who was in a serious argument with a White male student. The two were shouting at each other when the student let out a major profanity calling the teacher a ‘M-F’ (the student actually said the obscenity). The shocked teacher looked at the student and said to him, ‘Why are you talking like that, you’re not Black?’ (p. 12)

In the situation above, the teacher attributed the student’s disrespectful behavior not to the White student himself, but to disembodied Blackness. Educators’ negative beliefs about Black males, combined with functionalist schooling practices, spell doom for Black boys with and without disability labels.

Ferguson (2000) and Harry and Klingner (2014) provided two of the most descriptive accounts of the functionalist schooling practices of labeling and excluding as they pertain to Black boys. Ferguson (2000) conducted research with Black boys in an urban elementary school on the west coast of the U.S. She detailed how educators drew on negative constructions of Black males as criminal and endangered to make sense of Black boys’ behavior and assign disciplinary punishment. Given the functionalist organization of the school, teachers were able to utilize available exclusionary policies and spaces to physically exclude Black boys they deemed “at-risk,” “unsalvageable,” and “bound for jail” from productive learning environments (p. 9).

Harry and Klingner (2014) conducted a qualitative study of 12 schools in a southeastern school district. Within those schools, the authors focused on 12 children and their experiences of special education processes. One of those children was an eight-year-old Black boy who the

authors called Matthew. The authors showed how educational personnel exploited functionalist special education processes to label and segregate Matthew because he did not meet their standard of normality in terms of behavior—despite the fact that Matthew had witnessed a death in his family during the time in which his behavior was assessed. A team of experts labeled Matthew with emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) and placed him in a segregated, self-contained EBD program after initially considering an LD label. They decided against labeling Matthew with LD because, although his reading and math skills were below his peers, they were near grade level. The goal of placing Matthew in an EBD program was to fix him as *he*—rather than educators’ practices—was understood as the problem.

As Ferguson (2000) and Harry and Klingner (2014) made clear, the implications of failing to see who Black boys truly are and can be, and relying instead on fixed, preconceived constructions of Black males, locks teachers into a narrow lens that fails to notice capacity and possibility. The result is that, in functionalist schools, Black boys are disallowed from exhibiting their full range of humanity without facing punitive punishment or institutional labeling. The system determines that ordinary childhood behavior become hypercriminalized and/or labeled deviant. Once determined to be abnormal, such behavior must be met with mechanisms of control, exclusion, and remediation. The consequence is that Black boys are frequently relegated to spaces that are devoid of quality learning opportunities and resources. In some cases, this combination of anti-Blackness and functionalist practices may produce a vicious, self-fulfilling cycle in which Black boys increasingly disengage with school as they experience marginalization, and school personnel continue to label and exclude Black boys as they interpret the boys’ disengagement as a sign of the boys’ inherent deficiency (Haight et al., 2016).

Additionally, student disengagement may be amplified if Black boys do not feel represented in curricula and instructional activities, thus strengthening the cycle (Milner et al., 2013).

Black Boys as Vulnerable Resources

Improving the schooling experiences of Black boys with and without disability labels requires an alternative framing of dysfunctional schooling for Black boys. Educational stakeholders must come to understand Black boys as vulnerable resources rather than problems. Understanding Black boys as vulnerable resources challenges the idea that Black boys are deficient and responsible for their own failure in school. It sheds light on the ways individuals work to further marginalize Black boys when they engage in racist and ableist practices and discourses. It also offers a path forward for reforming the racist, functionalist education system to improve Black boys' realities. Specifically, understanding Black boys as vulnerable resources provides an approach for disrupting functionalist practices and discourses and anti-Blackness in local educational contexts. In this section, I conceptualize Black boys as vulnerable resources. Then, I review two empirical studies that position Black boys as vulnerable resources and conclude with implications for this alternative framing.

Black Boys as Vulnerable

The traditional definition of *vulnerable* can be found in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines vulnerable as "capable of being physically or emotionally wounded." This definition is helpful for understanding what it means for Black boys to be vulnerable as Black boys are, no doubt, susceptible to both physical and emotional harm in school and society. However, despite its utility, this definition does not go far enough with regard to contextualizing Black boys' lived experiences. The definition lacks specificity

regarding the type of factors that facilitate Black boys' susceptibility and does little to assist people in understanding how to respond to vulnerable Black boys.

To expand the notion of vulnerability discussed above, I draw on notions of vulnerability from the fields of bioethics and ecology. In some medical research and healthcare communities, vulnerable populations are recognized as groups who are susceptible to poor health and well-being resulting from racist and classist policies, practices, and environments (Blacksher & Stone, 2002; Fox, 2002). For this reason, bioethics scholars argue that vulnerable groups require special protection and services (Ruof, 2004). The definition of vulnerability among ecological scientists closely resembles the definition in bioethics as it, too, recognizes the influence of external factors on the health of particular species. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classifies vulnerable species as those facing a high risk of extinction in the near future due to physical, social, economic, and environmental factors (IUCN, 2001). In other words, no species is blamed for its own demise. National and international organizations such as the IUCN, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are committed to protecting vulnerable and endangered species.

When I say that Black boys are vulnerable, I mean that Black boys are susceptible to racist and ableist constructions of Black males that flourish in schools and society (Curry, 2017). They are also susceptible to violent practices that often stem from those mythical narratives, which I have demonstrated throughout this article. In school, they are vulnerable to a system that does not recognize them as human beings, as intelligent life forms who can and have the right to think, feel, express themselves, have ambition, and participate in the co-construction of society. Given Black boys' vulnerability, they deserve special protection and services in school that do not require them to have a disability label.

Black boys are vulnerable to more than just the tropes of Black males mentioned in the first half of this article (i.e., images of Black males as violent, criminal, hypersexual, and unintelligent). They are also vulnerable to any image of Black males that is unidimensional and limits Black boys' ability to exist and understand themselves as complex beings. For instance, Carey (2020) argues that dominant narratives of Black males as sensationalized heroes, superhuman athletes, and entertainers undermine efforts to dismantle the very racist, classist, and ableist systems that sustain such narratives and keep Black boys and men at the margins, spiritually and socioeconomically. Further, narrow definitions of Black masculinity are particularly harmful to Black boys who identify as gay, bisexual, and transgender. Queer Black boys often endure acts of physical and emotional violence at the hands of those who subscribe to restrictive definitions of Black boyhood and manhood (McCready, 2004). Like Black boys with disabilities, Black boys who identify as gay, bisexual, and transgender are at a greater risk for health disparities than their White counterparts due to intersectional oppression (American Psychological Association, 2018). When educators fail to disrupt limited constructions of Black males or, worse, reproduce them, they harm Black boys. They limit Black boys' opportunities to be.

Black Boys as Resources

Black boys are not only vulnerable, they are also resources. They are assets to themselves and their communities. They bring to school special gifts that are often unrecognized by educators but warrant recognition (Annamma & Morrison, 2019). These gifts include, but are not limited to, the gifts of story, resistance, and intelligence (Annamma & Morrison, 2019). Collectively and individually, Black boys possess unique histories, cultures, experiences, and skills that they can use to improve their individual schooling experiences. They understand the

world in ways that others do not, and they possess the power to shape their environments and the thought of individuals with whom they interact. Moreover, in collaboration with Black boys, local educational stakeholders can draw on Black boys' assets to inform and modify existing practices for the purpose of providing large numbers of Black boys with a meaningful and empowering education.

Black Boys as Vulnerable Resources in the Literature

Below, I use extant literature on Black boys to illuminate how researchers have positioned Black boys as vulnerable resources by trusting Black boys to voice their stories of oppression and resilience in school. I selected two empirical articles published in the past five years that exemplarily capture the multifaceted lives of Black boys with and without disability labels in U.S. schools (Banks, 2017; McGee & Pearman, 2015). Specifically, I included qualitative studies in which the researchers centered the voices of Black boys and—through their words—emphasized the boys' vulnerabilities, particularly their vulnerabilities to racism and ableism, while foregrounding how Black boys served as resources to themselves and their communities. Together, these articles demonstrate that local stakeholders have much to learn from Black boys if they seek insight into the boys' lived experiences and how they make meaning of the world. The articles also highlight the pressing need for local stakeholders to reform current schooling practices, a task that can be accomplished by working collaboratively with Black boys.

Banks (2017) conducted a qualitative investigation to understand the urban and suburban schooling experiences of Black boys labeled with learning disabilities and placed in segregated settings. She captured the boys' vulnerability in a number of ways. For instance, she demonstrated how general educators' failure to provide the necessary supports to meet one Black

boy's learning needs led to his (Michael's) placement in special education and the assignment of a stigmatizing label. Michael explained:

I wish I would have been in special education classes in high school [in order] to get the help I needed. I really needed it. I struggled [in the general education classes]. I also think when you have a learning disability, it wears on you. You start looking around and you are more cautious of who may know or who can tell [that you have a disability]. (p. 101)

Michael verbalized that, despite the stigma of having a disability label, he wished he would have been placed in special education sooner in high school due to inadequate supports in general education. He spoke as if general educators were not responsible for educating students who fall outside the expected norm of academic performance, which is not the case. General educators *are* responsible. However, the existence of the siloed systems of general education and special education—a byproduct of a functionalist system—permits general educators (with assistance from other school personnel) to push out students they deem “too different” to teach. Those displaced students then become a “problem” for special education staff to deal with.

Another boy, Jackson, also spoke about the stigma of being labeled disabled. He described feeling “a little self-conscious” (p. 102) about his disability label and verbalized his inability to explain to his peers why he received extra support in class. The fact that Jackson experienced difficulty explaining his “extra support” suggests that, perhaps, his school did not do a sufficient job explaining to students (with and without disability labels) that all students require different levels of support to be successful and that is okay. Also, Jackson would have likely not had such an experience had his school effectively merged general and special education to provide supports and services to all students on an ad-hoc basis.

Banks (2017) also documented how Black boys served as resources to themselves and teachers in the face of adversity. For instance, she showed how Gregory successfully challenged teachers' misconstructions of him that resulted from their negative views about Blackness and disability. Gregory helped his teachers "see [him] in a whole different light" (p. 104) after he spoke with them about his learning styles. Obviously, the burden of shifting educators' harmful beliefs should not fall on the shoulders of Black boys, especially not those who experience racism and ableism. However, Gregory's actions demonstrate that Black boys labeled with disabilities have the capacity to educate and effect change in local contexts.

McGee and Pearman (2015) used qualitative methods to study how internal protective and risk factors operated in the lives of Black boys enrolled in urban high schools. With regard to vulnerability, the authors found that the boys suffered anxiety over reflecting stereotypical Black male behavior and academic performance. Some of that anxiety stemmed from the fact that their teachers invoked negative ideas about Black males while interacting with students. One student, Michael, shared:

Sometimes my teacher may say something like, "For a Black guy from the ghet-toe, you are really on the ball. You go boy!" And I be sayin' in my mind, don't you know how stupid you sound saying that? But I don't doubt my own abilities and my mom always told me that when I grow up I can be whatever I wanted to be and if I try I can succeed at anything that I want to. So her ignorant comments, they don't make a difference to me because I still know that I can do it. (p. 531)

The above quote demonstrates that Michael was aware that his teacher held harmful notions of Black males that mediated her interactions with him. She held low expectations about Black

boys who faced economic oppression and lived in concentrated poverty. Michael served as his own resource, drawing on his mother's positive construction of him—which he internalized—to combat his teacher's misconstruction and persist in school. Michael was fortunate to have been exposed to an anti-deficit view of what it means to be a Black boy and man in the U.S. However, many Black boys are not so lucky. For some Black boys, the primary narrative of Black boys and men that they are taught to believe is one of Black male failure, particularly in the context of urban poverty. They then internalize that myth and see little hope for themselves in the future. Black boys need greater exposure to positive and complex images of Black boys and men to help expand their understandings of who they can be and what they can accomplish.

Much of McGee and Pearman's (2015) representations of Black boys as resources to themselves highlighted the value of Black families and communities. Like the example above, many of the ideologies and images that Black boys drew on to remain resilient in their racist, ableist schools were derived from the boys' families and communities. Another interesting example emerged from the words of Brice, another Black boy in the study:

I am mentored by the men from Kappa Alpha Psi's [Historically Black all male fraternity] The Kappa Leadership Development League they guide us [a group of Black high school males across the city] and encourage us to mentor youth in our neighborhoods. So I tutor mathematics at an elementary school once a week. If they [the men from Kappa Alpha Psi] can invest in me and my abilities, then I can do the same for the students I tutor. (p. 529)

Brice's participation in the mentoring program provided him with a positive image of Black men as college educated and servers of their communities. Moreover, as Brice verbalized, he internalized his mentors' message of the importance of giving back to one's community. This

image and messaging served as reference guides for Brice as he navigated a fraught education system. They also provided Brice with the motivation to be a literal resource to younger students. This particular example serves as a reminder that Black boys can benefit greatly from relationships with Black men, particularly those who have successfully navigated the system themselves. Schools can and should help facilitate such relationships.

Conclusion

Black boys' lives matter, and they should be treated as such, especially when Black boys are students in public school (Carey, 2020). As it stands, the functionalist education system allows for educators to act on deficit views they hold about Black boys. It permits them to weaponize exclusionary and stigmatizing practices against Black boys they deem problems. As a result, Black boys suffer in school. These activities can be altered, however, if educational leaders adopt a new understanding of Black boys. Schooling for Black boys can be improved if local educational stakeholders recognize Black boys as vulnerable resources rather than pre-ordained problems.

Recognizing Black boys as vulnerable resources means acknowledging that Black boys require special attention and protection but do not need to be "fixed." Black boys face oppression on the basis of race, gender, and other socially constructed identities (e.g., disability and sexuality). Thus, any effort to improve their lives must account for their unique social positions.

Special attention includes programs that allow Black boys to construct their identities in community with other Black boys. Research on single-sex schools suggests that Black boys benefit from participating in all-male learning environments (Brooms, 2017; Nelson, 2016). Such environments can provide Black boys with multiple opportunities to build meaningful relationships with Black men, situate their identities within a social context, and challenge rigid

notions of Black masculinity by critically engaging with issues of race, class, ability/disability, and gender. Special attention also includes providing Black boys with culturally responsive instruction (CRI) that sparks joy and an enthusiasm for learning in the souls of Black boys (Johnson, 2017). Implementing CRI is more than just giving a Black boy a book about a Black boy because he and the main character share a racial identity. Implementing CRI is about acknowledging students' complexity, recognizing that students' cultures are dynamic and that students' racial identities do not govern the communities of practice in which they participate or have participated (Paris & Alim, 2014). Implementing CRI is also about educating Black boys about the diversity of the world, building relationships with their families and communities, fostering critical thinking, and modeling fairness and respect for difference (Richards et al., 2007).

Most importantly, recognizing Black boys as vulnerable resources means “asking Black boys who they are, what they think, and what they desire in their lives now” (Dumas and Nelson, 2016, p. 40). Doing so offers a path forward for reforming the existing racist, functionalist education system that keeps Black boys at the margins. By seeking insight into Black boys' experiences of the world, local educational stakeholders can discover what works and does not work for the boys (Warren et al., 2016). They can work with Black boys and utilize the boys' assets—their cultural repertoires—to make substantive changes in local contexts, including changes in how school leaders conceptualize Black boys (Swidler, 1986). Meaningfully engaging Black boys labeled with disabilities is especially important for advancing systems change. Like all Black boys, those in special education enter school equipped with cultures, skills, and knowledges that, when tapped into, can serve as tools for reimagining and redesigning inequitable education systems. However, Black boys in special education also have a distinct

perspective of the harms produced by the existing special education system. How they make meaning of the system and their ideas for reforming the system can be leveraged by local leaders—in collaboration with the boys—to bring about equity in school organization and practice, particularly in ways that benefit Black boys with and without disability labels.

Much can be done to ensure that Black boys thrive and are allowed to exhibit the full spectrum of human emotion: joy, sadness, fear, romance, anger, and triumph, for example. Material and ideological systems *can* be restructured or dismantled to nurture Black boys rather than oppress them. However, teachers, administrators, and other local leaders must be willing to listen to and work collaboratively with Black boys. It is the only way.

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