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Hard Bigotry, Low Expectations and Soft Support: Educating American African Boys in the United States with the Warrior Method

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Educating American Africans boys has been a mixture of political rhetoric, educational pedagogy, and historical neglect. Although American African educators have produced several models for effectively educating Black boys, most of them are dismissed as too "radical" by White researchers who have little understanding or experience in observing these models in action. A brief review of educational approaches involving American African boys concludes that "epistemological racism" inhibits understanding how cultural differences influence learning among American African boys. The warrior method is one such model and is presented as just one alternative to traditional methods of educating Black boys.

> Some say it is unfair to hold disadvantaged children to rigorous standards. I say it is discrimination to require anything less—the soft bigotry of low expectations. Some say that schools can't be expected to teach, because there are too many broken families, too many immigrants, too much diversity. I say that pigment and poverty need not determine performance. That myth is disproved by good schools every day. Excuse-making must end before learning can begin.—Bush (1999)
>
> Black men in America have their ancestral roots on a continent so very far removed from the consciousness of the vast majority of black males in the Maafa.[1] This is not accidental. The removal of African culture from the minds of Africans was systematic and took place over centuries and continues with the negative images of the continent portrayed by the media. . . . If only Kosovo, Northern Ireland, and Chechnya were shown on CNN, revulsion toward Europe would match that which has been created after centuries of negative portrayals of Africa.—Winbush (2001)

Even before speechwriter Michael Gerson provided these infamous words to his boss, then-presidential candidate George W. Bush, rhetoric over the performance of students of color[2] in the United States' public school system had grown increasingly severe. Educators were bemoaning

[1]The term *Maafa* refers to the suffering of Africans through slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression throughout history. It is a term popularized by Marimba Ani's 1994 book *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora.*

[2]Although I still struggle for a better term than "people of color," I prefer it to the abusive term "minority" because the latter is an incorrect description of the former in terms of world population. Throughout this article, I continue that struggle and hope that one day it will be resolved.

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the "educational gap" between students of color and their white classmates in articles and books. The soon-to-be elected Bush would eventually appoint William Bennett as his drug czar, and Bennett would add the inevitable ingredient of racism to his dialogue on crime by saying:

> If you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down . . . an impossible, ridiculous and morally reprehensible thing to do . . . but, your crime rate would go down. (Bennett, 2005)

Negative pronouncements about the educational and societal potential of American African[3] boys are nothing new. Twenty-five years after the American Civil War, former president Rutherford B. Hayes chaired the First Mohonk Conference on "the Negro Question." Held at Lake Mohonk, Ulster County, New York, from June 4 through June 6 of 1890, the conference addressed the burning question of how to educate the nearly 4 million Africans in America emancipated at the end of the war. In one of the addresses to the conference, General S. C. Armstrong, first principal of Hampton Normal School, which would become Hampton University, said,

> The Negroes work there all day and study two hours at night in the night school for three years. In one department of these works we bring in technical training, and the students learn to work by drawings. We have one colored boy, Moses Davis, who has a genius for architecture, whose work in this department is attracting attention. Somebody ought to give him a chance, *not too much of a chance*, as it might spoil him, but a chance to work his way up. (Armstrong, 1890)

Such language has been a consistent theme in describing the education of Black boys. Limit them. Observe them. Be careful of them. These "approaches" to educating American African boys are often difficult to discuss because of the dysfunctional ways that Americans discuss race and racism. In a searing article about educating American African boys, Jenkins (2006) argued that

> the underachievement, lack of inclusion, and backward progression of African American men within American society, and particularly within the educational arena, has once again surfaced as a trend that demands immediate attention. However, the challenges of reversing the negative circumstances facing African American men requires transforming a broad array of social, political, economical, psychological, and educational issues that are deeply rooted in the very power structure of America. On one hand, the society espouses rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate Black males, but, on the other hand, practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard.
>
> Put differently, the experience of the Black man in America seems to be one in which he is called "mister" but is treated with a "niggardly" regard. And the result is the positioning of Black males at the lower rungs of society and their experiencing underachievement in almost all aspects of life. (Jenkins, 2006, p. 127)

At first glance, Jenkins's assertion appears pessimistic because he believes, as many American African educators do today, that nothing short of a wholesale transformation of several institutions and attitudes is necessary to educate American African boys. He correctly pointed to the societal contradiction of policymakers' platitudinous assertions that "on one hand, the society espouses

[3]I use the term "American African" rather than "African American" throughout this article because it is in keeping with an increasing number of Black scholars that "American African" places the cultural origins of the individual in Africa rather than America. It is not merely a rhetorical device but an actionable effort to use more precise language to describe those who are designated "Black people" in the land mass referred to as the United States.

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rhetoric of concern and desire to elevate Black males, but, on the other hand, practices a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disregard" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 127) while thwarting opportunities and nurturing stereotypes that actually expand the crisis of Black boys failure within the American educational system. Black writers including W. E. B. Du Bois (1903), Carter G. Woodson (1990), and Jeff Menzise (2012) have written extensively about America's historical love–hate relationship with educating Black males.

Regrettably, there is a strong resistance by non-Black educators and researchers to even consider alternative methods of educating Black boys—particularly methods that are labeled "Afrocentric" or what this author prefers "African-centered." There has always been an abundance of literature that disproves racist and stereotypical "scientific findings" about Africans, but it is often marginalized in an academy that prefers to remain anchored in Darwinian-like views of Black people in general. Elsewhere I have argued that

> it seems hypocritical that as long as Black children received overdoses of white culture in nearly all of their subjects, no attention was paid on how such knowledge generally failed to raise test scores or appreciably diminish school absenteeism. Yet when Black educators achieve these two modest but necessary behaviors for learning, they are criticized for creating "myths" about human history and science. Forget that George Washington never took an ax to a cherry tree, threw a dollar over the Delaware River, or stood up in a rowboat to get across that same river. Forget about the racism that pervaded American presidents from Washington through Eisenhower as documented by Kenneth O'Reilly in [his book] *Nixon's Piano*. As Maulana Karenga has noted, much of western history is self-congratulatory and full of myths that reinforce the notion of white superiority and black inferiority. *Teaching Black boys to understand their own history and its relationship to white supremacist history is an essential characteristic of educating young black boys*. (Winbush, 2001, p. 72)

Furthermore the lack of exposure of non–American African educational researchers to studies done by and about American Africans is appalling. This writer once used Robert V. Guthrie's (2003) history of psychology *Even the Rat Was White* in a class at a predominantly White university. At the beginning of the semester, a White colleague of mine said that he had never heard of the book and by the end of the semester, after having read the book, asked me furtively whether I thought the book was "racist." I asked him why he would ask such a question, and he said that he was appalled at the racism of such psychology luminaries as G. Stanley Hall and Lewis Terman in describing American Africans in their early 20th-century research. I asked him how his surprise at these revelations made the book "racist." He stumbled at my question for a few minutes and then said, "You're right, just because someone describes the racism throughout the history of psychology doesn't make him/her a racist, does it, Ray?" I agreed of course, and thought that his rather naive rhetorical question reflected his lack of cultural exposure within a discipline he had been teaching for more than 30 years.

Scheurich and Young (1997) referred to this type of bias as "epistemological racism" and said that it is endemic to research involving people of color. It distorts the worldview of both the researcher and the researched and is a direct result of the system of White supremacy. Furthermore, it is often so embedded in the sciences that it is difficult to objectify, let alone discuss. What American African educational researchers have attempted to do with their alternative views of educating Black boys is to challenge this epistemological racism, and it has not been easy. Their attempts have often been met with indifference, ridicule and even with the most paradoxical of charges, "cultural bias." I had a colleague question my use of African-centered therapeutic

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approaches in working with Black men by asking me, "How could an African American man raised in rural Tennessee respond to therapeutic approaches that were embedded in African culture that is so far removed from his everyday life?" I countered his question by asking, "What is more likely: that same African American man responding to my African-centered approach or adapting a psychotherapeutic intervention from 140 years ago developed by a Viennese psychiatrist by the name of Sigmund Freud?" These same theoretical attitudes hold true in providing culturally relevant educational pedagogies for American African boys.

It is difficult for scholars, mostly White but in many cases Black, to discern how racism mediates much of what they have learned and currently teach about Black people in general and Black boys specifically. Lewis Gordon (1995) argued that

> with racism's permeation of daily life, grandiose assaults on racism—highly public spectacles against exceptional behavior—miss the mark. Racism, as a function of extraordinary individuals conceals itself from itself through making its noxious values so familiar and frequent that they cease to function as objects of observation and reflection; they in short, become unreflective and so steeped in familiarity that they become invisible. (p. 38)

It is difficult for social scientists to objectify this "invisible racism" when they write and do educational research with American African boys. This writer believes that the critique of racism/White supremacy must be aggressive, because, as Gordon argued, racism is aggressive in making sure it becomes familiar and ordinary. For example, one study presents the following data: "23 percent of eighth grade boys report that they did not drink milk in the past week, compared to 7 percent of their White peers" (Educational Testing Service, 2007) The data are reported, of course, as a deficiency in the nutritional lives of Black boys and does not take into consideration that many Black parents consciously avoid the use of dairy products for their children because of the high lactose intolerance most American African have, estimated at 70%.

Rather than present a short description of several African-centered educational intervention strategies that currently exist, the remainder of the article focuses on my own work as a psychologist interested in *effective* developmental intervention strategies for Black boys. I also discuss the challenges faced by Black social scientists in advancing their research because of the epistemological racism that even pervades funding sources.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE WARRIOR METHOD

In the mid-1990s it was common to refer to Black males as "an endangered species" because of their challenges in education, overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, and their overall dysfunctional behavior as fathers and sons. As an American African social science researcher, such claims exhausted me because there was ample "evidence" that many of them were generated by cultural bias, reinforced by epistemological racism, and cloaked in the garb of questionable empirical research.

Like many other American African social science researchers, I knew of African-centered programs that disproved many of the assertions made by White social scientists studying young Black males. There was Gilbert and Tyehemba-Taylor's *Simba* (*Kiswahili* for "lion") Program established during the 1990s that had been providing effective rites of passage programs to dozens of boys in California. Taylor said,

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> Violence crime, poverty, drug abuse and murder can be totally eliminated by people making different choices. These choices are made as a result of how individuals see themselves and others, and how they think, feel and act towards themselves and others. (Gilbert & Tyehemba-Taylor 1994)

There was also Malcolm X Academy in Detroit, an American African school that had significantly raised grades and standardized test scores for boys but was met with hostility because it was located in a nearly all-White neighborhood ("Hostility Greets Students," 1992).

In 1996, while teaching at Fisk University, I received a travel fellowship to study the last years of Fisk's greatest alum, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Du Bois died in and is buried in Accra, Ghana, and I spent 2 months mining the documents of his last great research effort, the publication of the *Encyclopaedia Africana*, a lifelong Du Boisian dream to write a set of books that define the world from an *African* rather than a *European* perspective. This herculean task, undertaken by Du Bois in 1961 but never completed because of his death, introduced me to the largest and oldest rites of passage program for West Africans, called *Poro* Society. Du Bois's writings as well as the George Padmore Research Library in Accra made repeated references to the society. The organization, estimated to be at least 1,000 years old, crosses the European imposed borders of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal and is found in various forms as far north as Mali and south to Cameroon.

I became intrigued by the rituals and induction ceremonies of *Poro* Society and believed that its rituals and methods could be applied to African boys throughout the *Maafa*. *Poro*'s most famous graduate was Sengbeh Pieh, also known as "Joseph Cinque," the enslaved mutineer on board the Spanish slave ship *La Amistad* that was popularized by filmmaker Steven Spielberg in 1998. While in Ghana, I interviewed several men who had gone through *Poro* and I was convinced that the initiation procedures could be adapted to boys in the United States and expanded to cover the entire life span of American African males. I made a rough outline of a book proposal, and within 1 year I had sold the idea to Amistad/HarperCollins. I reasoned that if I could expand the work of my doctoral dissertation and provide a more comprehensive developmental theory of American African males, it would lead to better educational and psychological interventions with a population that had been underserved for decades.

American African scholars who have developed both theories and programs that actually work for Black boys often find it difficult to penetrate journals and funding agencies so that their work can join the discussion of ideas about the educational aspirations of American African boys. Similar frustrations exist for those social scientists working with American African girls. The same is not true for research involving White boys and girls. For example, Mary Pipher's (2005) research on White girls has received widespread praise for her analysis of developmental issues concerning young White females. I add the adjective "White" because it is a common occurrence in social science research to use generic labels (in this case "girls") thought to be applicable to *all* girls regardless of their ethnic or cultural background.

Similarly, Jerome Kagen's (1962) classic longitudinal study *Birth to Maturity* has no Black counterpart, which would follow Black boys from birth to age 18, in psychological research. In the past 50 years, longitudinal studies involving Black boys have been incredibly rare, and when they do exist, the period of observation is usually no greater than 5 years (Hauser, 1972). Research support for such studies is even more rare because they are often costly and may involve a team of scientists dedicated to a single sample for long periods.

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Understanding these research constraints and wanting to expand ideas presented in my doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago (Winbush, 1976), I saw the book deal with Amistad/Harper Collins as a chance to provide a developmental perspective on American African boys, which had never been done in psychology. Non-Black scholars rarely read in a refereed journal about theories or programs that successfully educate Black boys. This lack of exposure is due to the deficits in the cultural competency of many teacher-training programs in schools of education in the United States, both at the graduate and undergraduate level. I devote the remainder of this article to my own experience in developing a theory and program that can be instructive for Black and White educators so that their own teaching and research will be more theoretically robust.

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THE WARRIOR METHOD: A PROGRAM FOR REARING HEALTHY BLACK BOYS

The Warrior Method: A Program for Rearing Healthy Black Boys (Winbush, 2001) was published a month after the events of 9/11 and was met with praise by both Black and White readers. The method has been taught throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Africa, Australia, and the Caribbean. The method directly addresses possible causes of Black boys' transition to an "endangered species," most notably the global system of racism/White supremacy. Deliberately written as a "handbook" and not just another recitation about the troubles American African boys face, its proscriptive recommendations provide a step-by-step strategy for creating "Birthing" and "Warrior Circles" that guide the lives of American African boys from conception to adulthood. What follows is a brief summary of this strategy, which I call the Warrior Method.

The Four Seasons

Similar to developmental stages offered by non-Black social scientists such as Erikson (1953), Kohlberg (1971), and even Freud (1900), "The Four Seasons" describe the developmental stages traversed by Black boys from conception to adulthood and are summarized next.

Spring—Conception Through Age 4 and The Birthing Circles

Similar to other developmental theories, *The Four Seasons* describe the age-related challenges and expectations related to Black boys' growth. Spring begins at conception because the prenatal world of Black boys differs remarkably from their White counterparts. Much of this has to do with the differential access of Black and White mothers to prenatal care. For this reason, I proposed *The Birthing Circle* concept. A Birthing Circle consists of seven to 10 persons acting as a support system for the mother from conception until birth. They provide helpful guidance, making sure that the mother gets regular prenatal checkups that ensure her and her child's environment is safe and secure. The father is part of this circle, but if he is not present, an older male acts as a surrogate father for the yet-unborn infant. Birthing Circle members meet regularly with the mother and ensure that the mother completes paperwork, addresses nutritional needs of her unborn child, and

manages the logistical problems posed by the actual birth, even accompanying the mother to the hospital at the time of birth is facilitated.

Summer—Ages 5 through 12 and The Young Warrior Council

At age 5, the child moves from the Birthing Circle to the *Young Warrior Council* with seven other boys, each of whom is of the same age as the child. Two adults then act as advisors for each of the boys. This group of 21 people serves as the boys' support network until they are 21 years old and helps to determine activities for the boys, including field trips, group readings, and speakers representing various professions.

At age 12, a formal program is held to induct the boy into manhood. What American Indians and other ethnic groups have in common are traditions and rituals that formally induct their sons into adulthood. These *rites of passage* occur at various times in the life cycle. Baptisms, consecrations, weddings, and funerals all have rites of passages associated with them. All cultures create ceremonies to mark these life transitions with rituals in which families and friends of the initiate participate. The most visible of these is the *bar mitzvah* ceremony in which the community initiates Jewish boys into manhood at the age of 13. The phrase *bar mitzvah* is literally translated "son commandment" and implies that the boy has a thorough understanding of Jewish law and is formally accepted as a man who participates in the life of the Jewish community. "Adolescence," when used to describe Jewish boys, is subordinated to the ritual of *bar mitzvah*. The Jewish *community*, rather than driver license bureaus, the selective service system, or state legislatures, decides when the boy becomes a man. As with other rites of passage, the ceremony takes place in front of community members to reinforce group cohesion and to pass rituals down from one generation to another.

Unfortunately, the period of enslavement disrupted many rites of passage ceremonies in the American African community. Slowly, enslaved American Africans forgot the ceremonies associated with *Poro* Society and replaced these ceremonies with rites taken directly from American culture that had no relevance to the culture of Africans in the *Maafa*. Cotillions for girls—still being held among members of what E. Franklin Frazier (1957) derisively referred to as the "black bourgeoisie"—imitate what is perceived as being elements of European culture (Winbush, 2001).

Autumn—Ages 13 Through 21 and The Warrior Councils

The period of "adolescence" is perhaps the most dangerous time in the lives of Black boys. High rates of school dropout, homicidal violence, and criminal behavior surround their lives, particularly if they live in inner cities. Ivory Toldson (The Journal of Negro Education, 2012) of Howard University and other young scholars have increasingly disputed much of the erroneous "research" about the plight of Black people in general—and Black boys in particular—that is pervasive in educational and social science journals, particularly as it relates to their adolescent years. One of the tasks of the Autumn Season is to deliberately educate Black boys about how epistemological racism portrays them and many of the flaws in such research.

Although instruction in all of the Seasons consists of cultural knowledge necessary for Black males to navigate living in America, the pedagogy during this period is deeper and far more

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specific during the Autumn Season. The Councils expose the adolescent boys to subjects involving economics, law, politics, and education, and during high school, religion and sexuality. The Councils continue to meet once per month and continue to decide on topics collectively between the boys and their two adult mentors. Investment clubs are also formed during this period so that the boys can understand how personal economics work in a communal setting. Discussions about sexuality are important during this period because of the prevalence of STDs among American African populations, particularly that of HIV/AIDS among Black women and men.

Winter—Age 22 Through Death and The Warrior Councils

With high school commencement, the Councils shift from their monthly meetings to a schedule that accommodates as many members as possible. Emphasis is placed on holding Councils that address the relationships between American African men and women because the African family has always been the most disrupted relationship in this community (Gutman, 1977). The Warrior Councils also begin their structured mentoring of American African boys in the first three seasons, which allows these boys to become spokespersons for their respective communities. I have jokingly called for the formation of a for-profit organization named "Rent a Middle-Class Brother for your Organization" (RAMBO for short), because the request for being a "role model" for groups of Black boys seem to target American African men firmly ensconced in the middle class. The Warrior Method eschews such limitations and encourages healthy Black men in their Winter stage from *all* social classes to mentor young men and serve as role models in their communities. Ex-offenders are also included in this group because they can tell the story of their mistakes and accomplishments in a society that is designed to ensnare them at young ages. Some examples of these ex-offenders include Malcolm Little, who became Malcolm X; Nelson Mandela, who became president of South Africa; and Geronimo Pratt ("Black Panther," 2011), who built self-sustaining villages in Tanzania. All were "ex-offenders" who turned adversity into opportunity.

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THE RECEPTION OF THE WARRIOR METHOD

After its publication, dozens of communities in and out of the United States embraced the Warrior Method. Warrior Method workshops, which help individuals establish Birthing Circles, Young Warrior Councils, and Warrior Councils, have been held in dozens of cities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. In 2004, actors Will and Jada Pinkett-Smith gave a generous grant to Morgan State University for the purpose of expanding the Warrior Method programs. The university used the grant to establish The Warrior Institute, which teaches the method to parents, educators, and policymakers ("The Warrior Method," 2008). Today there are dozens of Warrior Circles around the world. Rarely has a month gone by since the book's publication that an individual does not call or write the Warrior Institute and request assistance and clarification about some aspect of the program. Work is now being done to catalog where all of the Circles are located.

CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite the existence of theories and effective programs for understanding and educating American African boys, funding for these programs remains miniscule. I have received dozens of calls over the years from people running such programs who have strong research proposals that have been rejected from traditional funding sources. Evaluation of the impact of existing programs is also an underfunded area by most government committees. State commissions (Frontline Solutions, 2010) that study the problems of Black boys are not enough; there must be tangible commitment to support research and evaluation on existing programs and efforts seeking to understand American African boys.

This article presents some of the cultural barriers that exist in understanding the educational and developmental needs of American African boys. It is important to challenge the epistemological racism discussed by Scheurich that exists both inside and outside of research institutions. Enough commissions have been appointed and conferences held that seek to "understand the problems of Black boys in America." It is late in the game, but not too late for policymakers and others to challenge paradigms, alter systems, and revise methods of intervention so that culturally appropriate theories and programs become part of the great conversation about educating American African boys.

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Raymond A. Winbush is the Director of the Institute for Urban Research at Morgan State University. He received his B.A. in psychology from Oakwood University and earned both his M.A. and Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Chicago. He has taught at Oakwood, Alabama A&M, Vanderbilt, and Fisk Universities. He is the author of *The Warrior Method: A Parents' Guide to Rearing Healthy Black Boys, Should America Pay?: Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations* and *Belinda's Petition: A Concise History of Reparations for the TransAtlantic Slave Trade*. He has lectured in Europe, Australia, South America, Africa, and the Caribbean on the contributions of Africans to world culture. Winbush has made appearances on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, CNN, and CBS discussing racism and culture. A former board member of the National Council for Black Studies, he currently sits on the editorial board of *Journal of Black Studies*.

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