

Invisible Black Boys become Invisible Black Men Unless...

By Bernard Gassaway

*"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."*¹

If we successfully educate Black boys in New York City, we kill the prison industry in New York State. If you want to know why young Black men are virtually invisible on college campuses throughout New York State, just visit juvenile detention centers and upstate prisons.

The members of the Bloomberg and Klein Administration must admit they have joined a line of administrations that failed to focus on the needs of the children who are most deprived by the New York City Public School System. As with previous mayors and school chancellors, the Black male crisis has never been a priority. This administration will not publicly acknowledge that there is a problem. More importantly, it has not offered a plan to address the problem that the system created and continues to perpetuate. To them, I ask, "What is your strategy or action plan to address the elephant in the room?" To them, I say, "Black boys are routinely victimized by this school system." I contend, to paraphrase Ralph Ellison, "Black male students are invisible, understand, simply because the institutional racist school system refuses to see them."

As one example, let's look at what is happening with Black boys and special education. Black boys are being targeted for special education programs throughout this city. They are more susceptible to being placed in a special education programs because of the stereotypes that have been ascribed to them due to their race and gender. They are considered angry, aggressive and dangerous. As a result, when Black boys show any level of independence or free will, school personnel routinely recommend them for special education placement. Black boys, who are developing normally, respond by outward assertiveness or total withdrawal when they feel unappreciated or disrespected by teachers or authority figures.

Look at how my first- and fifth-grade teachers described me nearly forty years ago:

First grade: "Bernard is very aggressive at times. Sometimes refuses to answer you or do any work."

Fifth grade: "Bernard requires personal attention at times. He is a very fast worker, but he becomes restless at times. He seems to control his aggressiveness at this point."

As a child in the New York City Public School System, I was a victim of the aforementioned reality. I was not challenged intellectually. My reward for good work was to work independently with the SRA kit. When I became bored, I became restless. Then I got in trouble. The seeds were planted. Eventually, I was labeled. And, yes, I became entangled in the juvenile 'justice' system. I contend the same practices are happening to our Black boys today.

I have witnessed too many Black boys caught in the vortex of the educational/prison system.

¹ Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man*

In order to save our children, Black boys in particular, I propose that we begin to design and build schools that serve them. We need to start from pre-K. We need to design schools that support the physical development of young boys. This sit still, static approach to learning must be replaced by a dynamic learning environment. We must develop a living curriculum that is grounded in truth and relevance. School communities must be able to hire a staff that cares about all children. This staff may be diverse in ethnicity but not in mission. We cannot allow incompetent, uncaring, diabolical teachers to destroy our Black boys.

What Happens to Our Boys When They ‘Survive’ the School System?

Unfortunately, when our Black boys survive the public school system, we convince many of them to attend predominately White colleges. We fail to warn them about the palpable racism they are likely to experience. What we do to them is shameful. It is another form of self-hatred. We convince them that true success can only be attained if they are in the presence of White people. As a result, many of these students fail to graduate unless they assimilate, thus losing any sense of cultural identity.

Now, colleges across this country are struggling with what may be called the ‘Black Male Dilemma.’ Black male college students, the relatively few, are disappearing from campuses across this country. Even historically Black colleges are not immune. While on a recent college trip to Howard University, a student representative told a group of alternative school students that he was the only Black man in his calculus class, which had thirty students. This profound revelation underscores the harsh reality that we are losing many of our young Black men long before they reach adolescence. At this rate, schools like Morehouse may be forced to become coed in order to survive.

I have read about programs in higher education called the ‘Black Male Initiative.’ This initiative acknowledges that Black men are invisible on college campuses across this country. The City University of New York established a committee to develop recommendations to address this reality. Its goal is to increase the presence and success of Black men in city colleges. To be successful with this initiative, one would need to figure out how to build a house without a foundation. While I applaud the intent of this initiative, I must say it may be an effort in futility as long as we live in a society where Black men are being destroyed during their childhood.

Are There Any Black Men in Positions to Create Educational Policy?

The invisibility of Black men is not exclusive to the City University of New York. Let’s look at Black male leadership within the New York City Department of Education. You can’t find it. You only see glimpses of it when the chancellor or mayor finds it convenient to put a few of them on parade to support a given initiative. Look over the mayor’s left shoulder. That is where the Black, silent figure will be standing. You might as well place a mannequin to hold the spot.

The current leadership atrocity in the Department of Education (and likely citywide) reminds me of Douglas Turner Ward’s play, *The Day of Absence*. In this satire, the town’s people awoke to see that all Black people in the town had disappeared. White folks’ homes were dirty; their clothes were not washed. Jails were empty. This play was produced in 1965. Fast

forward to the year 2006. Imagine if we had a “day of absence” in the Department of Education (DOE)? Let’s start with DOE headquarters. Other than the restrooms being dirty and no security guards to scan visitors, business would run as usual. The majority of schools would be empty of students, except for specialized schools and schools in districts of choice and privilege. More than enough staff would be available to teach. You get my point.

You Too Can Become Invisible

I have learned that invisibility is not exclusive to Black people. If you are non-Black and work on behalf of Black children, you too become invisible. You may advocate for children, but don’t advocate too hard or you may be seen as ‘one of them.’ If you really put children first, watch your back. Your motives will be questioned. You will become a target. You see, it is okay to create slogans like “Children First.” But don’t you dare take it seriously, or else.

Principals and teachers are taught if they want to truly advocate for children, find another line of work. Principals and teachers cannot teach children to have a voice if they themselves are rendered voiceless. As a result, the victimization of children, Black boys in particular, goes virtually unchallenged.

Recommendations

We must develop a multipronged approach:

1. Over the next five years, establish independent schools to serve approximately 100,000 children. Eventually increase this number to 200,000, which is roughly 20% of the public school enrollment. Focus on elementary and middle school students (Black boys particularly, not exclusively).
2. Change specific practices and policies in public education that are harming our children, particularly our Black boys, e.g. inappropriate special education classification.
3. Eliminate the wholesale, reprehensible practice of standardized testing. Start with the elementary grade levels. This would free millions of dollars for childcare. It would also increase instructional/learning time exponentially.
4. Develop teacher training centers in partnership with public and private universities and colleges.
5. Eliminate the Eurocentric curriculum in our public schools, particularly schools in non-European communities. Replace it with documents and other source material that address truth and relevance.
6. Demilitarize our schools. Replace school safety agents, vis-à-vis police personnel, with school community-based patrol. Hire senior citizens and parents to provide school safety.
7. Combine elementary and secondary public schools with the college and university system. City University of New York Chancellor Matthew Goldstein may never publicly criticize public school’s Chancellor Joel Klein because it would be politically incorrect. However, Chancellor Goldstein must admit that the public school system has failed to prepare students adequately for college. Therefore, I think the mayor should appoint one education commissioner to head all public education. This commissioner would be responsible for pre-K through university. Think of the possibilities.

If the mayor believes in the city’s university system, he should give it the responsibility of training teachers. Think about it. With all of the schools of education within the city, both public and private, why does the Chancellor Klein vis-à-vis the mayor spend millions of dollars per year to hire an Australian company to provide professional development for our teachers? Clearly, this is a vote of no confidence in the American college and university system.

8. Empower public school students to establish a union. This union must be free of adult involvement, unless requested. This would provide students will a vehicle to exercise a free voice, free of toxic adult involvement.

Conclusion

In order to save our children, we must acknowledge that racism is the main reason why Black boys, in particular, in New York City have never received a quality education. Therefore, we must begin to provide them with alternative learning communities that are free of racist ideologies and practices.

In order to save our children, we must eliminate racist policies and practices that perpetuate a cycle of poverty that breeds intracommunity violence.

In order to save our children, we must save ourselves. Adults can no longer fantasize about the good ole days. Truth be told, those days never existed. We caught hell just like our children are catching hell. If the good ole days were that good, we would not be in this predicament now.

In order to save our children, we must keep them in the nest a little while longer. We let go too soon. This is especially true of our boys. We expect too much of them, too soon.

In order to save our children, we must invest more in childcare than in prisoncare. If we provide state of the art universal childcare for all children, the prison industry as we know it may become nearly obsolete. We must stop sacrificing our children, particularly our Black boys, to provide a livelihood for upstate rural communities, a place clearly where they depend on the prison industry for their economic survival.

Final Charge

Black men who have survived the system and have totally assimilated to the corporate model must come 'home.' To them I say, "Do not hate your children because they reflect the evils of our culturally deprived communities. Fulfill a moral and cultural obligation to use your talents and skills to change a life or two. Our Black boys are crying out for help. Instead of running away from them, we need to run toward them. Black boys cannot become Black men without real Black men in their lives.

Black men who have been assimilated to the criminal model, you too must come 'home.' Our children need us now more than ever. We cannot brag about our criminal prowess. If you have children, get involved in their lives. Once you demonstrate your true commitment to your children, they will innately forgive you for not being in their lives. I have seen too many children bewildered by the question, "Why isn't my father here?" I have silently asked myself that question a thousand times.