

**Fed Up and Speaking Up:
Black Educators Share Recommendations to Reduce Biased and Unjust Suspensions of
Black Boys**

Donna Y. Ford, PhD
Distinguished Professor Department of Educational Studies
Kirwan Institute Faculty Affiliate
Special Education Program
College of Education and Human Ecology
Ohio State University
Columbus, OH
ford.255@osu.edu

Brian L. Wright, PhD
Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of Early Childhood Education
Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership
College of Education
The University of Memphis
Memphis, TN
blwright1@memphis.edu

Aaron J. Griffen, PhD
Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
DSST Public Schools
Denver, CO
ajgriffen1974@gmail.com

Raphael Crawford, EdD
Dean of Instruction/Principal Mentor
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools
Nashville, TN
raphaelcrawford06@gmail.com

Michael A. Robinson, EdD
Founder and CEO
Forest Of The Rain Productions
Savage, MD
forestoftherain@gmail.com

A Tale of Two Black Boys

Erik Patton, a fourth-grade Black boy, lives with both parents in a predominantly White high-income community. His mother is a teacher and father is an accountant, with his own firm. Erik's school is designated as one of the top elementary schools in the district. He has attended the school since first grade. Admission is competitive, requiring high test scores, letters of recommendation, a lengthy application to be completed by one parent/caregiver, along with an interview with the student. The Pattons were elated that Erik had been accepted; their efforts paid off - he is very intelligent, enjoyed learning, and is always excited about school and meeting new friends. This enthusiasm lasted a few weeks, quickly dwindling when his primarily White classmates began teasing him, calling him racist names. Some even pushed him on purpose in the hallways and during recess. Initially, Erik did nothing, other than shed tears in the school restroom and at home. When he finally decided to tell his teacher (Ms. Nash), she immediately assumed, in some way or another, Erik must have contributed to his classmates teasing him. Frustrated, angry, and sad, Erik, in a raised tone stated: "I did nothing wrong. You always blame me but not the White kids for anything. I don't like this school. I want my mom and dad!" His tone of voice added insult to injury as Ms. Nash completely ignored Erik's complaint and accused him of being aggressive and disrespectful. As is all too common for Black boys, Erik found himself in the principal's office pending in-school detention. When he returns, the White boys will be waiting.

Patrick Arnold, a third-grade Black boy, lives with his mother in a predominantly Black working-class, low-income neighborhood. Ms. Arnold works in housekeeping at a local convalescent home for the elderly; she is among the working poor. Patrick attends a Title I elementary school with a large concentration of students on free and reduced lunch and federal supplemental funds to assist in meeting the academic needs of their students. He is considered a high achiever at this school -- in the top reading group and excels in math and science. Over the years, several teachers have praised him as a model student when it comes to academics and behavior. Despite Patrick's school success, when one of his classmates (a Hispanic boy) decides to trip him as he rushes to join his reading group, Patrick loses his balance and accidentally falls, bumping into a White girl who falls with him. Katie begins to cry and Patrick lies there in pain and tears too. Their teacher (Mrs. Coles), without asking questions and seeing if Katie (but not Patrick) is okay, assumes this Black boy intentionally pushed this White girl. As Patrick, still in pain, tries desperately and tearfully to explain what happened, Mrs. Coles refuses to listen and begins reprimanding Patrick for his intentionally aggressive behavior; she marches him right to the principal's office. Limping due to a painful ankle and hand, Patrick is wondering why his teacher did not see or say anything to the boy who tripped him and why she thought he would

hurt one of his classmates on purpose. These questions lingered in Patrick's mind as tears filled his big brown eyes.

For decades, school district, state, and national reports have exposed a troubling, pervasive, and consistent fact – Black boys and girls of all ages, income levels, and achievement levels are victims of racial discrimination by teachers and other educational professionals. This discrimination starts early, with Black male preschoolers representing the largest percentage of students suspended of any racial and gender group. Specifically, while consisting of 19% of preschoolers, Black boys representing an astounding 52% of all suspended preschoolers. Upchurch's (1997) book entitled "Convicted in the Womb" speaks volumes concerning the significance of the early childhood-to-prison pipeline.

As with older Black students, a plethora of data reveal and expose intentional and explicit biases among White teachers, mostly females, who penalize them for subjective and negative interpretations of their behavior, while ignoring the behaviors of White students for similar and more problematic behaviors. For example, Black boys and girls are accused of being aggressive, intimidating, and threatening for speaking up (e.g., defending themselves when falsely accused by teachers, and for being bullied, physically attacked, and called names by other students), like Patrick and Erik. Conversely, White students can be involved in less subjective behaviors like deliberately hitting, pushing, and smoking -- but get lighter 'sentences' than their Black classmates. As these two vignettes illustrate, the unjust school experiences of far too many Black boys, in spite of their brilliance, diminishes their spirit. Schools should and must be places that are responsive and dedicated to cultivating and engaging students' ideas, interests, strengths, and abilities.

What Would You Do? Black Educators Speak Up

As depicted in the vignettes above, Black boys (and girls) are frequently (mis)labelled as troublemakers from a very young age. The overwhelmingly White female teaching force often sees Black boys as older, less innocent, and undeserving of protection than their White peers (a practice called adultification). Even when Black boys are high-achieving and model students, the slightest infraction, as seen with Patrick and Erik, can quickly find themselves adultified, criminalized, and suspended and/or expelled from school (Wood, Harris, & Howard, 2018; Wright, 2019). Many of these suspensions are the result of zero-tolerance policies, whereby even minor "misbehavior," or no misbehavior at all, as in the case of Erik and Patrick, can trigger racial and gender bias that lead to penalties that include suspension and expulsion.

Racial disparities in suspensions can and do dampen Black boys' enthusiasm toward school--they often get the message that school is a place where they are not welcome but, instead, are heavily watched and scrutinized (Ford, Wright, & Moore, in press; Wood et al., 2018). This, in turn, makes them less likely to be (pro)actively engaged and involved in

acquiring academic knowledge and skills, socializing with classmates, and interacting with teachers. *To suspend means to stop*. As a result, far too many Black boys are denied genuine opportunities to achieve at high levels because of an unwelcoming and hostile classroom environment that contributes to inequities and negative assumptions. In the sections that follow, Black male educators who have P-12 and higher education experiences, share a few recommendations regarding what they would do in the cases of Erik and Patrick; in the spirit of advocacy and keeping Black boys *in* school and learning.

Brian L. Wright

Moving from deficits to strengths

The teachers (Ms. Nash and Ms. Coles) would do well to reflect on their perceptions of the children in their classes and under their care. They should consider how these boys and those like them are negatively affected and traumatized by the tendency of many educators perceiving them as “troublemakers” and “bad boys”, even when behaving like White boys. Self-reflection is important. Ask yourself, “Am I holding the Black boys in my class to different and unrealistic standards of behavior than other children and, if so, how, why, and what are the effects/outcomes?” What can I do to reduce -- and ideally eliminate -- racial biases against Black students?

The two teachers have to notice the language they used when talking about Erik and Patrick. How often are terms like “aggressive,” “angry,” “too mature,” “unteachable,” “hyperactive,” or “out of control” used when describing Black boys? How does your language shift when you talk about other children? While Black boys are adultified -- treated older than actual age, White boys are what Ford and I refer to as ‘youngified’ -- treated younger than actual age and deemed innocent and deserving of protection.

Given both boys were so matter-of-factly accused of wrongdoing when they were the victims, it is important that teachers like Nash and Coles learn about the larger structural challenges Black boys face, including systemic racism, that affects family income and wealth, access to resources, representations of Blacks in the media, and the likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system (e.g., the school-to-prison pipeline). Ask yourself, “What obstacles to Black boys face that I haven’t acknowledged when over-adopting zero tolerance practices? How do Black boys like Erik and Patrick display their creativity, resilience, and brilliance in overcoming these perceptual and social/external challenges?”

Pay attention to all interactions in the classroom with the understanding that teachers really do not have ‘eyes in the back of their heads’”. Of course, we can’t see everything, but do

not assume the Black boys (and girls) are the source of the problem. Instead, the children involved in a discussion of the matter; this helps to reach a resolution that recognizes the humanity in each child. The lessons learned from culturally responsive and diplomatic dialogue with students can result in teachable moments rather than shaming or signaling out children; the goal is to be cognizant of the treatment and experiences of others -- which we must do as professionals and adults working with “other people’s children” (Delpit, 2006) .

When teachers look for Black boys’ strengths, as in the cases of Erik and Patrick, and reflect on classroom exchanges between children to identify problems and misunderstandings, they are more likely to reject negative stereotypes and become advocates for Black boys and girls.

Raphael Crawford

Defend and protect the innocence of Black students and minimize emotional triggers.

Erik was victimized by a system that refused to protect him from race-based bullying and assault and then punished for abiding by school rules to report being assaulted to his teacher instead of fighting back. Educators’ personal biases toward Black students impact their ability to see these children as innocent or worthy of not only high-quality education but assumptions of innocence. School professionals tend to criminalize Black children and generally view them as larger, older, and more adult-like than other children, which results in believing that Black boys should be held *more* accountable for their behavior. Too often, elevated voices and animated expressions by Black students, which are cultural assets, are viewed as disrespectful when disrespect was not the intent. However, teachers, who many times were equally as loud and animated in my experiences, demand punishment, including suspension; and by the time the child sees an administrator, he or she has become so frustrated that de-escalation is nearly impossible; in those cases, the child is doubly and unfairly punished—frequently leading to suspension.

Two primary concerns are Erik’s safety in this school and his loss of enthusiasm for learning, both of which must be restored. Reassuring this child of his safety and the opportunity to be heard and supported are critical. Erik and his family should receive a sincere apology from the school and teacher with an opportunity to meet and discuss plans to prevent future problems and misunderstandings. The teacher and school must undergo cultural sensitivity and anti-bullying training. The principal must eliminate emotional triggers, those things that cause a negative and desperate reaction from children (e.g., the culture of bullying, teacher bias, and racial intimidation and insensitivity toward Black students). The teacher should be reprimanded

for failure to follow school and district policies and the students guilty of bullying and assaulting Erik should be punished, including possible suspension. In this case, the teacher and school must earn back the trust of Erik and his family. The school leader must create an environment where Black students feel safe and supported and are encouraged to perform at their best academically and socially.

Create an affirming, safe, and socially just school that supports and protects Black students.

Black children must have teachers and school personnel who look like them and with whom they can relate (Easton-Brooks, 2019). America's schools are a microcosm of the country and are not void of leaders, teachers, and staff who display and express hostility toward Black children, especially boys. Trust-building is essential in student-teacher relationships because children quickly determine whether an educator cares for them, is fair and supportive, and is someone in whom they can place trust. Given Patrick's history in this school as a top-performing and well-behaved student, he had earned the right to be heard and believed. The problem was with the teacher, who likely harbored negativity toward Black males, and refused to show basic concern for this injured Black boy; refusing to see him as worthy of assistance, compassion, or innocence.

The teacher and school should apologize to this student and his family for refusing to provide needed assistance and support to them, and for criminalizing Patrick with false accusations about the incident. Families send their children to school believing and hoping they will not only be safe but also cared for and safe. The principal must implement a plan to ensure that all students receive needed supports in a socially just and culturally responsive learning environment. The teacher should be reprimanded for refusal to assist an injured child, which I consider to be a violation for not following school and district policies. The Hispanic child who caused the incident should be punished, including apologies to both victims. As in the case of Erik, Patrick's teacher must receive mandatory training around cultural sensitivity and appropriate responses to injured students. A review of this teacher's performance evaluation, student and teacher satisfaction surveys and employee file should be conducted; with her being placed on a plan of improvement for the remainder of the school year. A conference with the teacher about her desire and suitability to work in the school with the assigned population of students is necessary to determine if she remains on faculty. This family should be given the opportunity to move their son to another classroom if desired. Patrick likely does not feel safe or supported with Mrs. Coles, which may impact his academic performance and behavior; the school leader must monitor his progress.

Aaron J. Griffen

Minimize Zero-Tolerance Policies and Practices

When students are repeatedly suspended, it harms both their academic and social standing. Their poor attendance begins to alienate them from peers. One may wonder why the phrase ‘poor attendance.’ When a student is suspended, it impacts their attendance and the schools, the more a school and district suspends and the worse their average daily attendance, which impacts their per-pupil funding. Therefore, suspending students repeatedly has a far greater impact than some are aware. To alleviate this phenomenon of zero-tolerance, suspension policies must be changed.

To do this would mean, for example, modifying and/or removing the recommended minimum suspensions for fights. When the district recommends a maximum of five days for example (or 10 in some states), schools interpret this as students must be suspended out of school for the maximum days. In fact, a school actually has the choice to not suspend, which I would have done with Erik and Patrick. By taking away the mandatory or recommended maximum, schools spend more time focusing on the student being in school. To do this, schools can implement a policy where infractions considered major, such as verbal altercations or physical ones, can receive a maximum of one day out-of-school suspension and a maximum of two day in-school- suspension (Griffen, in press). In addition, school leaders could replace out-of-school suspension with in-school suspensions entirely for verbal altercations, where there was no impact on campus safety and security by allowing for Restorative Justice (RJ) practices to occur for both students and staff; this allows for relationships to be restored (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005; Zehr, 2002).

Restorative Justice (RJ) practices require training for both administrators and teachers. It is essential that all staff be trained in recognizing how to minimize conflict and seek to restore relationships in their classrooms that do not require front office intervention. As is the case with Patrick Arnold, had the teacher been trained in RJ practices, she might have used immediate de-escalation techniques that require her to remain calm, speak in a tone that validates all students, such as simply asking each individual student “What happened?” Patrick would have had an opportunity to share his vantage point and story of what happened, including pointing out that he was tripped by another student. This should keep Patrick from being moved to the office as he himself was a victim in addition to the girl Patrick unintentionally fell on. The true harm was caused by the boy who tripped Patrick, thus resulting in a potential three-pronged conflict resolution and intervention taking place using RJ practices. Keep in mind, the tripping would require front office intervention because of injury to the Patrick and Kati. But that does not mean suspension is the only or best option.

Make Adult Presence Meaningful - not Punitive

Adults being observant and present throughout the school day is another way to remedy out-of-school suspension. Adult presence includes working with students on social and emotional levels in addition to being physically present. To increase adult presence, I suggest that teachers begin by welcoming students into the classroom each morning, each passing period, and speaking to all students with a smile and using their name when saying, “Good morning, Good afternoon, Have a great day, See you tomorrow”. Moreover, teachers should implement Safe Zones which are specific classrooms where students could go in the event they are in conflict, upset, and/or need an outlet to vent and calm down. The classroom would have a sign that reads “Welcome. This is a Safe Zone”.

This safe zone would include a moment away from a teacher as well; Erik and Patrick would have benefitted from this space. Ideally, students will begin to develop relationships even with other teachers they have no classes with... Staff is able to mitigate multiple conflicts, provide cultural, social and emotional support to new students and to students struggling with daily microaggressions due to race, gender orientation, income, and more. This process provides support for our counselors who are then able to follow up and leverage the teacher relationships with students to provide greater support (Griffen, in press).

I recognize that a shortage of school counselors exists; but hope that administrators will be diligent about searching for one or more, especially one trained in multicultural counseling (e.g., Ford, 2010). As a principal, I was blessed with four counselors on my campus. They outnumbered our School Resource Officers (SROs) by 2 to 1, unlike some schools in the United States who have SROs but no counselors. By having more counselors, SROs should be less likely to have to engage with students who are struggling. Their presence should be for safety and security from the outside, not the inside. The less interaction the SRO has with students for being children (e.g., defiance, disrespect, disruption, verbal altercations, or fights), the less likely a student will be suspended, expelled, or arrested. You see, students become criminalized when the SRO is involved. Their interaction now becomes a law enforcement issue whereby any defiance of an order from an SRO can become ticketable and, in some cases, arrestable. Therefore, the presence of teachers, counselors, and administrators in the hallways, in the classrooms, in the cafeteria, and at school events minimizes negative interactions.

I am not saying that having an SRO is always bad and negative. I loved our SROs when I was a principal. I learned a lot from them. We need SROs to protect the school from outside harm. However, we do not need SROs to protect the school from the children they serve. School personnel should be working *with* students in these areas and *with* the SROs and counselors to develop their presence as an advocate and supporter of students’ academic and social achievement, and cultural well-being.

Leverage Data to Call Out Biases

When reviewing data, we tend to only want to look at the numbers and make decisions. When you see people as numbers, you don't see the story behind the numbers (Toldson, 2019). I challenge administrators to dive deeper into discipline referral data by reviewing the rationale and comments written for referrals. I often discovered that the referral was not because Black males like Patrick and Erik were being disruptive, defiant, or disrespectful --they were being referred for the *(mis)perception* of being disruptive, defiant or disrespectful. One will further notice bias in the comments. Some may read, "She rolled her eyes"... "He kept laughing when I asked who took my mouse to my computer"... "Another student told me he was the one who took my mouse"... "She is being inappropriate today"....

I recommend that all administrators thoroughly read the comments of all referrals and start to question the intent and the impact of what was written; use that data to help Black boys and girls by pointing out the biases being perpetuated because of misinformed perceptions. I have found that Black boys and girls are often being asked to be the polar opposite of who they are culturally and socially because a culturally different adult wants to exact their power and privilege over Black bodies in order to gain a sense of personal safety and security. Make it clear that you will not allow Black students to be punching bags so that adults can feel empowered and not held responsible for their misguided and biased decisions and actions.

Michael A. Robinson

Determine if Your Understanding of Diversity is Fact or Fiction

White educators (about 85% of the teaching force) and those of color who are a minuscule percentage of teachers (about 15% combined) can make the same error when it comes to working with and advocating for children of color. Given these percentages, it is blatantly apparent that White teachers have much more impact; we must not ignore or trivialize those who are not grounded in nor see (or want to see) the invaluable and non-negotiable intersection of culture, gender, and learning. Far too many tend to rush to judgment. Subsequently, seldom is there an exploration of the causes or factors that lead to some of the decisions students make and *(mis)behaviors* they display.

Higher education institutions and school districts must do better at preparing future and current educators to be different from those we have had in the past and now. The bottom line is that educators who lack anti-bias education and multicultural experiences, training, knowledge,

skills, dispositions, and awareness of implicit and explicit biases tend to seek to discipline and punishment first, and then understand and show empathy and equity later, if at all. Their disciplinary decisions typically are grounded in the negative influences socially, familially, and individually that frequently see children of color as suspects rather than learners and victims.

I recommend that administrators examine the relationships among socialization, learning theories, and academic achievement. Based on this review, craft professional development opportunities designed to create and maintain a culture of diversity that is deeper than matching the staff and student ratios based on color and ethnic backgrounds. Through specific professional development designed to shape curriculum and instruction in a rigorous and multicultural/culturally responsive way (e.g., Ford, 2011) all educators and administrators can begin to use discipline as a teaching tool rather than as the starting gate for the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

Conclusion: Ford's Summary

The Eriks and Patricks of the educational and social worlds represented in this work and elsewhere are fed up and speaking up about their experiences and (ms)treatment in schools (and society). Like the Black male authors of this work, Erik, Patrick, and other Black boys need and deserve culturally competent teachers and more teachers of color who are invested in ensuring that they reach their full potential and that their dreams are fulfilled. Such teachers provide them, and all children, with a classroom environment that is responsive to their needs and diverse identities, including their different languages, literacies, interactional styles, and cultural practices. This cultural responsiveness will help teachers like Ms. Nash and Ms. Coles to recognize and engage the positive identity development of Black boys, and to encourage Black boys to use their authentic voices toward agency as full and respected classroom members.

Too much responsibility is placed on Black children to fit into a eurocentric school culture that was never created for them. This results in punitive, uncompromising, hostile, and culturally assaultive education - curriculum, instruction, relationships, and learning environments. Discipline over-representation, special education over-representation, and gifted education under-representation tell countless stories of inequities by the majority White female teaching force. When it comes to racial, gender, and economic equity: educators can and must do better; higher education and professional development in P-12 settings can and must do better; policymakers can and must do better; Black educators and families can and must do better.

As the United Negro College Fund makes clear - a mind is a terrible thing to waste. I contend that a mind is, also, a terrible thing to erase. Join us - the authors of this short work - in

being fed up and speaking up. We wish all students, families, and educators the best as they begin school this fall (2019) and every year. #StopRacismInEducation

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Biosketches

Brian L. Wright, PhD, is an associate professor and program coordinator of early childhood education at the University of Memphis. For a more thorough exploration of how teachers can nurture the Black boys in their classes, see my award-winning and bestselling book *The Brilliance of Black Boys: Cultivating School Success in the Early Grades*. He is a former early childhood teacher, consults nationally, and has written extensively on achieving African American boys P-12 and racial-ethnic identity of Boys of Color, and teacher identity development.

Donna Y. Ford, PhD, is a distinguished professor in the College of Education and Human Ecology at the Ohio State University. She is in the Department of Educational Studies, Special Education Program. Professor Ford has written extensively in gifted and urban education, working to increase the representation of Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, along with preparing educators to be culturally responsive and equity-minded. Dr. Ford has 14 books and over 300 publications. She consults nationally and has received numerous awards.

Aaron J. Griffen, PhD, is a P-12 practitioner-scholar with 20 years of experience in public and charter as a middle school English teacher, assistant principal, as a high school principal, and, currently, as a Director of Diversity Equity and Inclusion at DSST Public Schools in Denver, Colorado. His research interests include Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Culturally Responsive Instructional Leadership, Multicultural Curriculum and Instruction, African American Educational Lobbying, and Urban Policy and Analysis. In addition to serving in P-12, Dr. Griffen is the Chief Operating Officer and Co-Founder of Prosperity Educators, LLC and is the author of the soon to be released book *The Power of a Praying Principal: An Attitude of Faith, Hope, Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in Schools*.

Michael Robinson, EdD, is the Founder and CEO of Forest Of The Rain Productions an Education Affairs Organization. He is the host of Parent Talk Live a weekly radio show with emphasis on educational topics germane to parents and educators. Dr. Robinson the Founder and Publisher of *Living Education eMagazine*, an online publication designed to expand the voices of the seldom heard in education, fair housing, parental/family engagement, academic research, and civic involvement.

Raphael Crawford, Ed. D. A former Tennessee highly effective P-12 principal and district level administrator, is currently chief consultant with The Crawford Group, LLC. He also serves as a principal mentor and dean of instruction with Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. His research interests include the criminalization of students of color, non-traditional families, mirror neurons and ethical leadership, and urban school principals and superintendents.