Joy and Pain

Like other parents raising African-American children, my husband and I worry about a lot, and we especially fuss and fret over our black boy.

December 19, 2013 By Allison R. Brown

We want our son to use his smarts for good. Do we coddle him too much? We want him to be tough and kind, but assertive and gentle, and not mean. His boundaries of independent exploration are radiating outward, concentric circles growing farther and farther from us.

We wring our hands and pretend to look away in acknowledgment that he's ready to claim his freedom, even as we cast furtive glances his way. We're beginners in the worry department. He's only 9 years old.

Our angst certainly isn't unique among parents of black boys. What's unique for us and for other such parents is that when we peek inside the matrix, we panic. Agents out there are bearing down on our son — bloodthirsty for his dignity, his humanity — as if he were the one. We feel outnumbered, but we hunker down for battle.

This is not a paranoid conspiracy rant. Recent data from the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education reveals that black boys are the most likely group of students to be suspended or expelled from school. Black men and boys are more likely than any demographic group to be targeted — hunted, really — and arrested by police.

Meanwhile, the number of black males taking advanced courses in elementary, middle and high schools and entering college remains disproportionately low. Suicide among black boys is increasing. Media imagery and indifference have locked black boys in their sights. Prisons have become corporate behemoths with insatiable appetites for black and brown boys and men.

My husband and I rightfully agonize about our boy. We agonize alongside many who are working to help, including the federal government. I know firsthand the work that the federal government has done and is doing to improve circumstances for black boys. This includes internal memos and meetings, interagency planning sessions, public conferences, community meetings and listening sessions, and now a White House initiative.

I also know that the federal government is accountable to numerous constituencies that sometimes have conflicting needs. Federal government workers must walk a fine line among

varying public interests, which occasionally has meant unintended consequences for black boys.

For instance, in 1994, the federal priority of “zero tolerance” for anyone bringing a weapon to school was signed into law as the Gun-Free Schools Act. That priority reached fever pitch after the Columbine school massacre in 1999 and subsequent copycat slayings and attempts to kill. Federal requirements were overshadowed by local authorities and school administrators who stretched the parameters of “zero tolerance” in schools beyond logical measure to include, for instance, spoons as weapons and Tylenol as an illegal drug, and to suspend and expel students as a result.

“Zero tolerance” has entered the realm of the ridiculous. Many schools have removed teacher and administrator discretion and meted out harsh punishment for school uniform violations, schoolyard fights without injury and various undefined and indefinable categories of offense such as “defiance” and “disrespect.”

Students are suspended, expelled and even arrested for such conduct without investigation or inquiry. There is no evidence to support use of exclusionary discipline practices as tools for prevention, and they have no educational benefit. The brunt of this insanity has fallen on black boys.

Recent federal priorities have targeted harassment and bullying in school to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students from peer-on-peer discrimination dismissed by, and in many cases encouraged by, school administration. Again, understandable.

The goal is praiseworthy — to protect, finally, a population of students and segment of society that has long been a whipping post for every political party, ignored in political discussions except to condemn. While my husband and I have ardently supported federal protections for LGBT students, practically speaking, we continue to lose sleep over our black boy.

Another peek inside the matrix tells me that the fever pitch around this latest federal agenda item will mean a significant cost to black boys when new categories of offense are created, new ways to characterize them as criminals unworthy of participating in mainstream education or society.

It’s one thing for educators to guide student conduct and educate students about how to care for and respect one another, which is a primary focus of the federal move against harassment and bullying. It’s quite another to change mindsets of adults who run the system, too many of whom believe and speak negatively about black boys and what they cannot accomplish or should not do.

To speak and think affirmatively, to affirm behavior and black boys as people, is to relish the silly jokes they tell within their context, to compliment them on their haircuts or groomed and styled dreadlocks and cornrows, to adopt lingo they create and add it to classroom repertoire, and to invite their fathers, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, cousins to participate in the educational experience.

To support black boys is to celebrate their physical playfulness and the unique ways in which they

may support and affirm one another. As with any other children, we must teach black boys through instruction and by example how to read and write, and how to conduct themselves without erasing their identity and attempting to substitute another. We must hone their instincts, whims and knowledge base so they can be empowered to exhibit all the good in themselves. We must be willing to show them our human frailties so they know how to get up and carry on after falling down. Yes, these things can benefit all children, but many children receive them by default. Black boys do not.

To love black boys is to refuse to be an agent of forces clamoring for their souls and instead to be their Morpheus, their god of dreams, to help them believe in their power to save all of us and to train them to step into their greatness. Those agents in the matrix are real. If everyone combines forces and uses common sense, we can declare victory for black boys and eventually all of us.

But without a change in mindset, federal initiatives, no matter their good intentions or the incredible talents that give them life, will continue to leave black boys by the wayside as collateral damage.

My husband and I will continue to fret, knowing the formidable challenges our son faces. We hope that if he has a son, that boy can be just a boy.

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