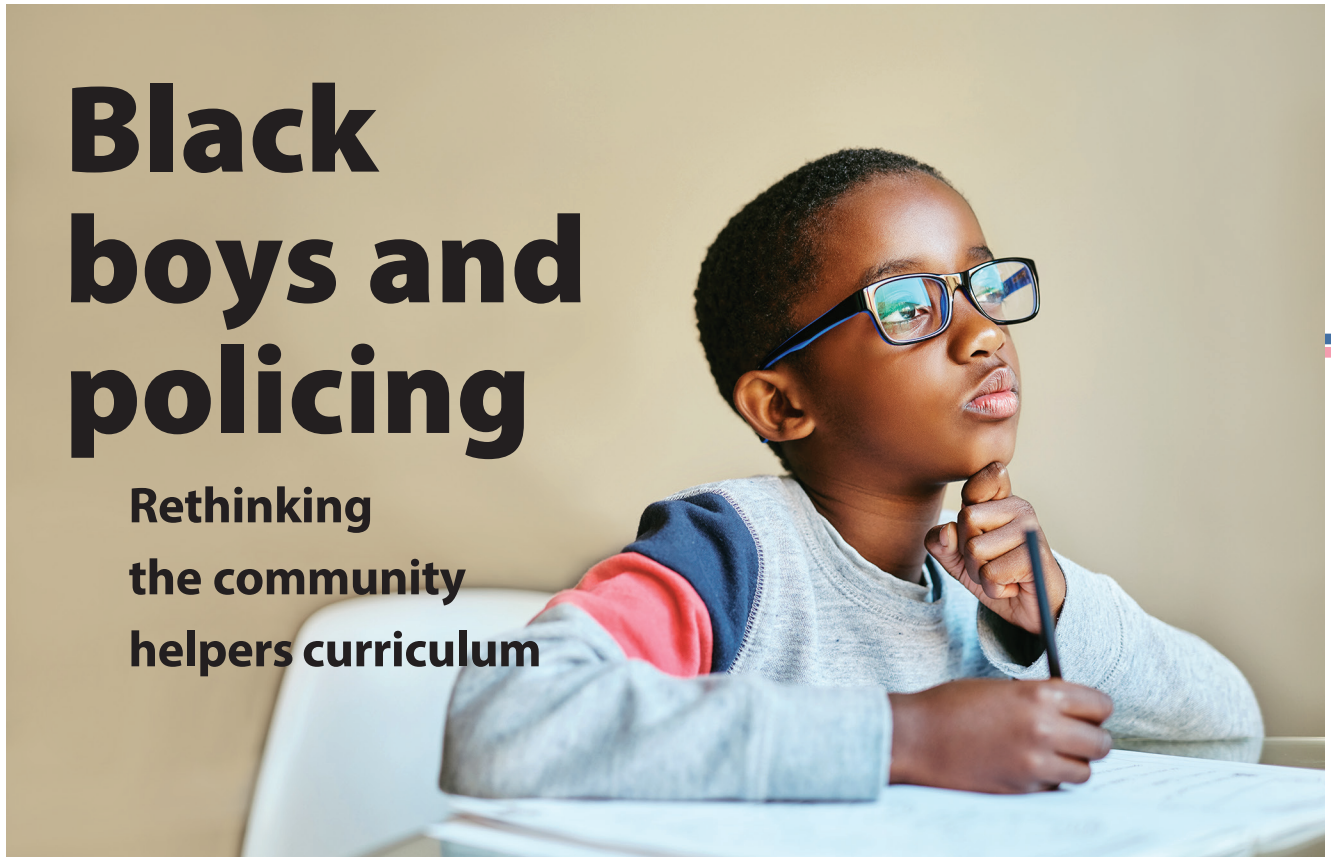


# Black boys and policing

Rethinking the community helpers curriculum



BY BRIAN L. WRIGHT

*“When I grow up, I want to be a Supreme Court judge. When people say, ‘Your Honor, he did rob the bank,’ I will say, ‘Be seated.’ And if he doesn’t, I will tell the guard to take him out. Then I will beat my hammer on the desk. Then [everybody] will be quiet.”*

— George Perry Floyd Jr., writing as a 2nd grader during a Black History Month activity (Espinoza, n.d.)

It is a tragic irony that George Floyd Jr., once a brilliant Black boy with dreams to serve on the highest court in the U.S., would grow up to be murdered by a white law enforcement officer who pressed his knee needlessly against Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

What did young George Floyd learn about the justice system? What do young Black boys today learn in

school about their relationship to the police and courts? The way educators frame the justice system and Black boys’ relationships to it matter. But too often, educators are unaware of the messages they send, even in the earliest years of school.

In this article, I consider and challenge a familiar curriculum unit that introduces children in the early grades (pre-K-3) to “community helpers.” Standard early childhood education social studies curricula are organized by thematic units that might include family, nature, and typically, community helpers, usually defined as anyone who works to help the community. The overall aim of the unit is to expose young children to how they can be active, responsible, and conscientious members of their community.

Based on these teachings, many children develop aspirations to become sanitation workers, bus drivers, police officers, judges, and other community helpers. I imagine this is what 8-year-old George Floyd had in mind when he wrote in his essay, perhaps inspired by the first African American to serve on the United States Supreme Court, Justice Thurgood Marshall.

And yet, for Black children, boys in particular, personal experience directly and indirectly contradicts the claims of well-meaning teachers that community helpers are friends who are there to protect and serve. Sadly, children may have firsthand experience of a family member murdered by police, or they may have witnessed these traumatic occurrences in media coverage that (re)traumatizes Black bodies and communities.

## Rethinking this part of the curriculum can be an early and effective start to making all of our curriculum and pedagogy more culturally responsive and humanizing for Black children.

In the face of a seemingly endless stream of murders of Black boys and men by police officers, how do Black boys reconcile this contradiction? Given the long-standing mistrust and alienation between Black communities and the police, a curriculum unit that many early childhood educators consider essential for children to know and understand can also become a source of trauma for Black boys.

This is just one example of how curriculum violence is an often-unexamined way schools reproduce systemic and structural racism and discrimination in the lives of nonwhite children, especially Black boys. Rethinking this part of the curriculum can be an early and effective start to making all of our curriculum and pedagogy more culturally responsive and humanizing for Black children.

This article is written in memory of the late George Floyd (46 years old), Trayvon Martin (17 years old), Tamir Rice (12 years old), Daunte Wright (20 years old), and the countless other Black boys and men whose lives were taken from them at the hands of security guards, self-appointed vigilantes, and police officers (Wright, 2021). My focus on Black boys and men is not intended to diminish the experiences, perspectives, and realities of criminalizing Black girls and women in schools and society (see *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique W. Morris), but rather to shine a light on the especially perilous

— and even deadly — position of Black boys in schools and society and ways we can begin to change that injustice in the earliest years of school.

### TRAUMA IN THE CURRICULUM

Despite efforts to make curriculum *anti-bias* (Derman-Sparks, 1989, 2008; York, 2016), *anti-racist* (Kendi, 2019), *culturally relevant* (Gay, 2010), *culturally responsive* (Ladson-Billings, 2009), *culturally sustaining* (Paris & Alim, 2017), and *multicultural* (Banks, 2014; Ramsey, 2015) whiteness and white ideologies continue to pervade the ways schools plan curriculum, deliver instruction, and manage (or mismanage) the multicultural and multiethnic classroom climate (Johnson, 2019).

When educators lack the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to infuse the curriculum with readings, activities, and assignments that challenge, nuance, and position and challenge students of color — Black boys in particular — in positive and affirming ways, they (wittingly and perhaps unwittingly), can (re)traumatize these children in disorienting and damaging ways.

Research on adverse childhood experiences has focused on trauma in children's and families' lives *outside* of school, but there is little to no attention paid to how schools exacerbate and even cause racial trauma in the lives of Black students. Some examples are overt, like when several Wisconsin

teachers asked students how they would “punish a slave” (Gostanian & Madani, 2021) and a California teacher engaged in a racist rant about one of her Black male students and his “poor” parenting (Obregon, 2021).

Others are deeply entrenched in policies, like rigid behavioral rules (e.g. walking in a straight line, no talking in the hallways) and disciplinary policies (e.g. zero-tolerance policies) that target students of color, Black boys in particular, who are marginalized in the larger society (Ford & Wright, 2021). Still others are unexamined aspects of the curriculum, like the community helpers unit.

### RETHINK AND REIMAGINE

When thoughtful consideration is given to these factors, it is necessary to rethink and reimagine the community helpers curriculum, explicitly concerning the policing of Black and Brown bodies and their communities. We should start by asking: Who are Black boys' community helpers and who are not? This is vital in a climate in which Black boys feel watched and unwelcome in schools and society.

In general, and specifically in the community helpers curriculum units, children are taught that police officers help prevent crimes and make sure people in the community follow the rules and laws to ensure they are safe. But is this true for all Black communities, and Black boys in particular? Black people are 2.5 times

more likely to be arrested than whites (Henning & Davis, 2017), and decades of data show that racial disparity begins for Black males when they are boys of school age.

Black boys are policed far more frequently than white boys in their communities, stores, schools, homes, and on social media, often for what many contend are inconsequential reasons like playing loud music and running.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights reports that, while Black children make up only 19% of preschool enrollment, they represent 47% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions. In contrast, white children represent 41% of preschool enrollment but only 28% of suspensions (Wright, 2019).

Black boys are also seen in schools and by society as more culpable for their actions and less innocent than their peers of other races (Wright, 2018; Wright, 2019). They are viewed as “bad boys” and “troublemakers,” suspected and dehumanized first before schools and society see their humanity.

## STEPS FOR EDUCATORS

Given the reality of policing in Black communities, how can educators teach about community helpers in honest, sensitive, and respectful ways without doing more harm than good? More importantly, how can educators use this unit and others to cultivate the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of Black boys in the face of systemic and structural inequalities? The answers to these questions lie in the actions educators take.

One such action is for teachers to educate themselves about “the talk” Black families must have with their children to prepare them for police interactions, advising them how to avoid confrontations with police and how to act if they are stopped. Black families engage their children in “the talk” out of fear, given the unrelenting surveillance and the presumption of criminality by law enforcement early in

the lives of Black children. Sadly, Black families must begin this discussion with their children as early as 5 and 6 years old because of the practice of “adultification” (adults seeing Black boys as older and less innocent than their white peers).

Educators should also understand and acknowledge the interactions Black boys and men have with the police, the results of which frequently include severe injuries or even death. If the community helpers curriculum unit — and others — are to be culturally responsive, relevant, sustaining, and responsible, the controversy surrounding policing in communities of color cannot be ignored.

Educators should anticipate that children are likely to hear about police incidents from family members, the news, and their communities, and therefore will need developmentally appropriate ways to talk about their feelings. These conversations and discussions must be honest, sensitive, and respectful to avoid (re)traumatization of Black boys.

Children's books like *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness*, written and illustrated by Anastasia Higginbotham, *For Beautiful Black Boys Who Believe In a Better World*, written by Michael W. Waters and illustrated by Keisha Morris, and *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice*, written by Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard and illustrated by Jennifer Zivoin, can help educators in beginning the conversation about police brutality of Black boys and men in their communities.

Teaching children about the world in which they actually live, including the responsibility that comes with being a community helper in diverse communities, must begin in the early grades. Educators must ask children what they know about the world, specifically about community helpers. This open-ended approach is vital for counteracting a narrative that characterizes our community helpers from an idyllic perspective that dismisses racism as

a thing of the past. That perspective — intentionally or unwittingly — downplays the need for the continuation of race, diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice work and activism.

Discussions in the curriculum about police officers as community helpers from a perspective that accentuates only the positives void of the documented systemic and structural changes that must occur concerning policing and Black communities limits opportunities to explore ways to change the current practice of policing. Moreover, educators must engage children in a balanced discussion about the role of police officers, the benefits, and the reality that sometimes police interactions do not occur as they should, resulting in serious injuries.

## BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Dialogue about community helpers and Black boys must include what Bryan Stevenson (2014) described as “getting proximate to suffering.” By this, he means the ability to come close to others who suffer from and experience racism and injustice. He asserts that if individuals are willing to come close to such matters, they can potentially enact change.

This is important for teachers, but change must also happen at the community level. I argue that it is necessary for community helpers in general, police officers in particular, to get proximate. When community helpers live outside of the communities in which they serve, they must get to know the people within these communities from a strengths-based and asset-based perspective.

Efforts to build positive relationships with Black communities and, by extension, Black boys from a distance limit police officers' ability to nuance communities' strengths and needs. They must get close enough to humanize and reimagine the people they have been charged to protect and serve. When police officers are trained to get proximate with the communities they serve, perhaps their attitudes and

beliefs about Black communities will allow them to understand the people they are trying to protect and serve more deeply.

Black boys need community helpers, police officers in particular, who can say, “I see you, I hear you, I am you.” This level of humanizing and honesty is vital if Black boys are to know and trust their community.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The murders of George Floyd Jr., Daunte Wright, and others are tragic examples that there is still much work to do regarding matters of systemic and structural racism and discrimination in schools and society. Black boys must see a different kind of policing, one that values Black lives like all other lives.

This valuing begins by recognizing the fear that Black boys have of the police, rooted in a long history in which white communities are served and protected and communities of color, Black communities in particular, are policed and underserved. Black boys must feel *welcomed*, not *watched*, if they are to realize their promise, potential, and possibilities.

Welcoming, nurturing, and honoring Black boys’ potential must start in the earliest years. These actions are essential to advancing the goals of equity in early childhood and beyond that have been advocated by many educators and organizations (e.g., NAEYC, 2019). Altering the community helpers unit in the curriculum is a good starting place, but it isn’t enough.

Educators must be intentional about building caring and equitable learning environments that not only develop literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development, but focus in a consistent and systemic way on racial equity. They must humanize and reimagine Black boys. To create these equitable spaces and teach effectively within them from a stance of developmentally appropriate and equitable practice, early childhood educators must be equipped to address bias and racism throughout the curriculum and the school and

have sophisticated pedagogical practices that include anti-bias and anti-racist practices.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, J.A. (2014).** *An introduction to multicultural education* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Derman-Sparks, L. (2008).** Why an anti-bias curriculum. In A. Pelo (Ed.), *Rethinking early childhood education* (pp. 7-16). Rethinking Schools.
- Derman-Sparks, L. & the A.B.C. Task Force. (1989).** *Anti-bias curriculum tools for empowering young children*. National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Espinoza, J. (n.d.).** George Floyd’s former teacher shares his 2nd grade essay about his Supreme Court aspirations. *Complex*. [www.complex.com/life/2020/06/george-floyd-2nd-grade-teacher-says-he-wanted-to-be-supreme-court-justice](http://www.complex.com/life/2020/06/george-floyd-2nd-grade-teacher-says-he-wanted-to-be-supreme-court-justice)
- Ford, D.Y. & Wright, B.L. (2021, April 22).** *Creating equitable classroom environments*. [diverseeducation.com/article/212696/](http://diverseeducation.com/article/212696/)
- Gay, G. (2010).** *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Gostanian, A. & Madani, D. (2021, February 3).** *Wisconsin teacher suspended after asking students how they would ‘punish’ slaves*. NBC News. [www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/wisconsin-teachers-suspended-after-asking-students-how-they-would-punish-n1256638](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/wisconsin-teachers-suspended-after-asking-students-how-they-would-punish-n1256638)
- Henning, K. & Davis, A.J. (2017, May 23).** *Opinion: How policing Black boys leads to the conditioning of Black men*. NPR. [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/05/23/465997013/opinion-how-policing-black-boys-leads-to-the-conditioning-of-black-men](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/05/23/465997013/opinion-how-policing-black-boys-leads-to-the-conditioning-of-black-men)
- Johnson, L.L. (2019).** Goin’ back to (re)claim what’s mine: A call for diaspora literacy in P-20 spaces. In L.L. Johnson, G. Boutte, G. Greene, & D. Smith (Eds.), *African Diaspora literacy: The heart of transformation in K-12 schools and teacher education* (pp. 3-12). Lexington Books.
- Kendi, I.X. (2019).** *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2009).** *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Morris, M.W. (2016).** *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. The New Press.
- NAEYC. (2019).** *Advancing equity in early childhood education*. Position statement. NAEYC. [www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity](http://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity)
- Obregon, N. (2021, April 1).** *Teacher goes on racist rant, not realizing Zoom was on, mother of Black child says*. NBC News. [www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/teacher-goes-racist-rant-after-not-realizing-zoom-was-mother-n1262843](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/teacher-goes-racist-rant-after-not-realizing-zoom-was-mother-n1262843)
- Paris, D. & Alim, H.S. (Eds.). (2017).** *Culturally sustaining pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.
- Ramsey, P.G. (2015).** *Teaching and learning in a diverse world: Multicultural education for young children* (4th ed.). Teachers College Press.
- Stevenson, B. (2014).** *Just mercy: A story of justice and redemption*. Spiegel & Grau.
- Wright, B.L. (2021).** Five wise men: African American males using urban critical literacy to negotiate and navigate home and school in an urban setting. *Urban Education*, 53(3), 451-483. doi:10.1177/0042085917690203
- Wright, B.L. (2019).** Black boys matter: Cultivating their identity, agency, and voice. *Teaching Young Children*, 12(3), 4-7.
- Wright, B.L. (with Counsell, S.L.). (2018).** *The brilliance of Black boys: Cultivating school success in the early grades*. Teachers College Press.
- York, S. (2016).** *Roots and wings: Affirming culture and preventing bias in early childhood* (3rd ed.) Redleaf Press.
- 
- Brian L. Wright (blwright1@memphis.edu) is associate professor, program coordinator of early childhood education, and coordinator of middle school cohort of the African American Male Academy at the University of Memphis in Tennessee. ■**