FROM "DISADVANTAGED" TO "UNDERVALUED":
The Empowering of Black Youth in the Business of Education

By Leon Theodore, M.S.W., Dallas County Justice Project Advocate

October 2020

INTRODUCTION

We have come to a landmark position in race relations, both nationally and in the education of our youth. This country has erroneously and dangerously embarked on a path of "zero tolerance" and a culture of control that harms children throughout the education system and carries through to our carceral system. This country has also implemented policies and practices – and perpetuated perceptions – about the most undervalued sector of our society.

> *Many schools see teaching African American boys as a daunting challenge. However, in many schools the primary focus of Black male children's educational experience is maintaining order and discipline rather than student learning and academic achievement.[1]*

Black people, our contributions, our participation, and our culture have been devalued from the inception of this nation – as if being Black itself is disadvantageous; as if living in a Black neighborhood or attending or supporting a Black institution is disadvantageous to the participant.

Evidence of this shines brightest in our education system. The innocence of youth, the hope associated with learning, is stripped bare for Black students. Innocence is replaced with "at risk," hope with "disadvantaged."

When something's label is changed, its value changes. When Black youth are labeled "at risk" and "disadvantaged," it implies that they are responsible for any perceived deficits. In actuality, systemic racism, implicit and overt biases, demeaning and degrading overrepresentation in the media, and the lack of culturally relevant programming in schools create environments and obstacles that Black youth are forced to navigate on the journey of "innocence" and "hope." Black youth are forced into a system that, on the whole, lacks care or concern for their wellbeing, yet tasks them with change. The labels of "at risk" and "disadvantaged" only serve to relieve this broken, guilty education system of responsibility for the harm it has historically caused, and instead shifts the burden to the very youth subjected to its inequities.

The truth is, these Black youth are *"undervalued,"* which mandates a differing perception that allows for proper supports, representation, and funding. "Undervalued" lays the responsibility at the feet of those in charge: the education system. "Undervalued" says to a youth, "It is my fault I didn't see your worth." And the next logical question must be, "What do I need to do to fix it?"

DEFICIT

Black youth are overrepresented in school disciplinary actions throughout the nation. Even when Black youth comprise as little as 23% of a school population, they generally represent 30-40% of the discipline population on average.[2] Advocates, armed with research, say this is due in part to the biases of educators, administrators, and, ultimately, the larger education system.

The purpose of this article is to expose the errant use of condemning and crippling labels in the current deficit-based education system, in hopes that state, local, and district educational agencies will update language to an appropriate and accurate expression. These labels not only influence a student's perception of themselves but, also importantly, they influence the perceptions of educators, administrators, policy-makers, and funders about Black youth.

"Deficit thinking" is a theory or concept that places blame for school failings solely on the student (usually students of color, and particularly Black students) and their background.[3] It surmises that the student's internal defects (deficits) are responsible without examining the systemic factors at play. But environmental factors are the building blocks of our educational system. (Why else do we fight so hard to get our children into the "right neighborhood" so they might attend the "right schools"?) Where and how a child is nurtured plays a definitive role in their ability to learn, and community is a major contributor to that nurturing. Yet, we consistently overlook crippling factors like redlining, over-policing, wage disparities, inequitable housing policies and practices, food disparities, and numerous other systemic racial issues that plague communities of color.

Knowing these practices have caused a wealth and opportunity gap, the educational system perpetuates the harm by labeling Black youth "at risk" – overlooking and denigrating the resilience of Black youth, their families, and their communities. And again, deficit thinking lays responsibility solely at the feet of these youth, families, and communities for overcoming roadblocks and, additionally, for overcoming the shame of a label that inherently debilitates and dehumanizes them. Black youth are expected to respond to these traumas with dignity, restraint, and composure seldom expressed by people thrice their age.

The labels "at risk" and "disadvantaged" both stem from and sustain negative connotations about Black students' actions, thoughts, and values. Black individualism, assuredness, and expression are demonized as obstinate. Consequently, "at risk" and "disadvantaged" have become interchangeable with "discipline problem," "defiant," and "disorderly," and Black youth are denied the opportunities afforded other youth. While

> *By the time Black boys reach the 3rd or 4th grade, their teachers and other school personnel no longer treat them like children, but rather like men.[4]*

schools should be a place of stability and empowerment, one where hope should flourish, they often reinforce the demeaning perceptions that Black students face in society; educators and counselors alike allow their biases to strip Black youth of dignity and opportunity. "At risk" youth are judged unworthy and undeserving of innocence. Even when Black students show promise, are engaged, and are present, they are still deemed worthy of excessive scrutiny – which in turn leads to excessive disciplinary referrals and perpetuates the concept that Black children must be controlled.

> *Black students, as a group, are at greater risk of being sent out [of the classroom] than White students. In fact, studies have shown that when comparing students with similar characteristics, Black students remain at higher risk of being referred.[5]*

Daily, Black youth have their opportunity for innocence and hope stripped before they step foot into the classroom. Their "blackness" is seen as a threat, a weapon, to be held against them, risking expulsion from the classroom and, longer term, from society.

UNDERVALUED

In business, when an item is undervalued, it may be discarded or misused. Place that same item in the hands of someone with vision, creativity, and insight, and its full potential can be realized. Sadly, through no fault of their own, Black youth today are seen as something to be thrown away. Labeled "problematic," "difficult," and "hard to work with," their full potential has not been realized. Their intrinsic value has remained constant, but they have been gravely underappreciated.

Historically, Black society has not been worth investing in. Yet throughout our history in America and long before, Black culture has been dominated by excellence, something to be copied and replicated. And despite obstacles in America, Black culture found a way to excel and add value to society. This fact must remain in the forefront of our minds, especially as we consider our youth.

Every child we mistakenly undervalue and mislabel detracts from society's bottom line. When we look at the ills of today – the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration, high unemployment in certain sectors, homelessness, food insecurity – we see the results of undervaluing people and communities.

Where you invest your money, you can see a great return. This country's lack of investment in communities of color means they have been denied the opportunity to produce an optimal return. As a whole, we have discounted large swaths of our society and laid the burden for it at the feet of those we undervalue. That's not good business.

Education is a business, and our education system has failed a large percentage of our youth, particularly Black youth and youth of color. We have labeled them as unworthy of innocence and hope, "at risk," without properly investing in them. We must start changing our perception – and theirs – by truly labeling them what they are: undervalued. We must raise their worth.

And what should we do to accomplish this critical goal? The education system – and society – must take responsibility for its shortcomings and wrongs: meaningfully work to change perceptions about Black youth and larger Black culture, restore hope and innocence to all students, and intentionally invest in the wellbeing and success of Black youth, families, and communities. By elevating this value and our investments, society as a whole will benefit.

Citations

[1] Gloria Ladson Billings, "Boyz to Men? Teaching to Restore Black Boys' Childhood," *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, v14 n1, p. 7-15 (Jan. 2011), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ911507.

[2] Data from Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) for Dallas, Richardson, and Duncanville Independent School Districts (ISDs) in Texas, 2018-19. Note: It is Richardson ISD for which the Black student population is only 23%.

[3] Richard R. Valencia (Ed.), *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice (The Stanford Series on Education and Public Policy),* Routledge Falmer/Taylor & Francis Group, 1997.

[4] Gloria Ladson Billings, "Boyz to Men?"

[5] Anne Gregory & Gabriel Roberts, "Teacher Beliefs and the Overrepresentation of Black Students in Classroom Discipline," *Theory Into Practice*, v56 n3, p. 187-194 (2017), https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1155477.

[6] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Beyond Suspensions: Examining School Discipline Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities, July 2019, p. 100, https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2019/07-23-Beyond-Suspensions.pdf.

[7] *Id.,* p. 105-6.