



How Educational Reform Principles Focused on Reform, Resilience, and Respectability Can Hurt Black Schoolboys

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The “Three R’s” is memorable shorthand for reading, writing, and arithmetic, long considered the requirements of a good education. In my research on Black boys in all-male public high schools, I learned that school leaders now place their faith in a different set of “Three R’s” consisting of *reform*, *resilience*, and *respectability*. While the original three R’s referred to academic skills, this new formula stresses non-cognitive or soft skills – and asks Black youth to change their character. Unfortunately, this new focus revives an old and troubling history of racial assumptions about who can learn and behave properly in school and beyond.

Reform – or Imitation?

Reform, the currently fashionable first R, is unavoidable in discussions of public education today. As market principles have seeped into public education, reform efforts have privileged innovation. Schools are constantly experimenting in order to find new paths to student success. Educators often assume that the most innovative schools will succeed and survive, while other schools close down.

Reform implies change, but when schools innovate, they are often only become “new” in the narrow sense of being different from other local schools. In fact, school leaders looking for legitimacy and renewal of short-term contracts often feel pressure not so much to experiment as to *emulate* other successful schools. I found this to be the case when I spent a full year observing and interviewing people at two all-boys high schools in the same city. Asking why and how school officials turned to all-male education to address the needs of Black boys, I found that there was strong pressure to emulate the character and curricula of elite private schools ranging from boarding schools to Morehouse College. At one Black male academy, boys wear blazers and ties, learn Latin, and face strict discipline. By contrast, when the first Black male academies were proposed in cities such as Milwaukee in the early 1990s, they were truly innovative because they implemented Afrocentric curricula rare in other schools at the time.

Resilience – or Blaming Students?

If schools have not been truly innovative, then it makes sense that responsibility for change has shifted to the students themselves. Over the past decade, a “character education” industry has promoted the idea that in order to be successful, poor youth should cultivate non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, optimism, and self-confidence. Mindsets and behaviors are assumed to be mutable. Grit, the virtue most often stressed in character education, has drawn much attention from academics and education professionals alike. Meanwhile, its close kin, resilience, has been taken up enthusiastically by many proponents of Black male academies. A common refrain is that Black male academies can create protective environments in which to build student resilience.

But my research is skeptical of these positive evaluations. Commendable as it is to shield youth from violence and other threats in their communities, educators who focus school efforts on promoting Black male resilience can end up using new language to tell an old story – of the rare and heroic child who relies on his inner strength to make it out of a bleak urban community.

Promoters of resilience training have not fully grasped how today's political context has aggravated divisions between upwardly-mobile Blacks and those most at-risk. In fact, scholarship on Black male resilience looks almost exclusively at *gifted* Black youth. As I argue in my book *Black Boys Apart*, today's political environment transfers risk and responsibility from institutions to individuals and in the process draws clear boundaries between the worthy and unworthy. In this context, Black male academies attract the most academically-oriented boys, leaving others aside. These schools can end up denigrating other boys in the community and encouraging their own "schoolboys" to choose new brothers over their old peers. Symbolic boundaries are promoted, and this boundary work extends beyond the school walls. As [Victor Rios's research](#) has demonstrated, police officers pit "lawful" boys of color against their "delinquent" peers and ask the former to side with authorities.

The Limits of Individual Respectability

History teaches to be wary of demanding self-correction by Black youth. Early U.S. Black leaders implored the Black masses to change their character in order to gain acceptance from White America, using calls to reject stereotypical Black behaviors by embracing virtues such as thriftiness and obedience. To be sure, such efforts could be important forms of resistance to racial injustices, and today some Black youth attempt to look respectable in public in order to avoid harassment by police officers. Yet these politics have also become associated with conservative political stances that deemphasized structural causes of inequality and drove a wedge between upwardly-mobile Blacks and the poorest Blacks. Now a new form of respectability politics has regained momentum in the post-Civil Rights Era, promoted by Black conservatives such as Shelby Steele. In his aptly titled book *The Content of Our Character*, Steele appropriates the "respectable" urgings of Martin Luther King, Jr. while ignoring his more radical ideas about societal change. This new politics of respectability dominates in Black male academies. The young men I spoke with learned fine dining etiquette as "true gentlemen" and saw themselves as more self-disciplined than their "unlucky" peers in the community.

Moving forward, policymakers and educational leaders should be cautious about building curricula around correcting behavior and mindsets. Strengthening individual character in all its forms – including grit and resilience – has widespread appeal, but this focus can divert attention from important issues of power and inequality. Educators must bear in mind how respectability curricula can harm Black youth both in and out of schools. The first step towards innovative education reform is to focus less on cultivating resilience in individual schoolchildren and more on promoting shared understandings and capacities to bring about important changes in communities, workplaces, and society as a whole. The most effectively educated young people, including Black youth, are those who not only develop personal strengths and skills but also learn how to understand and challenge social injustices. A respectability politics cloaked as character training is not sufficient.

Read more in Freeden Blume Oeur, *Black Boys Apart: Racial Uplift and Respectability in All-Male Public Schools* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).