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# THE 'IMAGINARY EXISTENCE' OF BLACK MALE STUDENTS

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**Abstract:**
This paper uses Crystal Laura's *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison-Pipeline* as the central text for exploring a term I refer to as "imaginary existence." The "imaginary existence" confines Black boys and other students of Color to a particular narrative that prevents teachers from being able to teach with love and continues to setup schools as sites of exclusion. This paper concludes with a call to teacher education to improve pre-service teacher training in order to begin shifting the narrative of Black boys as "bad."

**Keywords:** Black boys, teacher education, White teachers

## My Autobiographical Turn

I was introduced to Crystal Laura's (2014) book *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* during a time I was feeling fraught with emotion about my position as an educator. Through this book, readers dive into an emotional and yet theoretical account of how our country's school systems do not protect the interest of, or utilize the interest of, Black bodies to help them navigate school. As I read *Being Bad*, I was instantly returned to a moment when I was accidentally hit in the face with a ball during the Fall 2015 school year.

"Ms. Jordan, I am so sorry, I am so sorry!" is all I heard, coupled with the sounds of footsteps running toward me. "Oh my gosh Ms. Jordan! Are you okay? I didn't mean it!" I heard, as I cradled my face in my hands trying to remain composed even though I was in extreme pain and a bit disillusioned. But Jayden stood there repeating himself and yelling, "Ms. Jordan say something!" At the same time, he was standing over my right shoulder rubbing my back, mumbling, "Ms. Jordan I'm so, so sorry!"

At the time of this incident I was a 4$^{th}$ grade special education teacher in New York City. I had a class of 17 boys. It seemed, based on stories passed along to me from previous teachers, that *only* my Black boys had been seen and treated as pathologies to be fixed. Jayden's sympathy for me was most definitely in response to knowing he's considered bad and that he's gotten in trouble for a lot less than accidentally hitting his teacher in the face with a ball. I tell this story as a way to share my experience of being a former classroom teacher and witnessing this concept of "being bad".

As Paley (2000) tells us, experiences are meant to be shared for the purposes of lessons to be learned. I choose to center my experience as a former classroom teacher in order to explore the idea of *imaginary existence*. In teaching, having an imagination can be extremely beneficial; imagination is an opportunity to push the bounds of classroom practice. But the imagination I speak of is more negative and damaging. It's an imagination that's imbued with dislike, distrust, and an overall sense of fear. What I am terming *imaginary existence* simply means to exist in someone else's created thoughts. The imaginary existence of an individual is based on the prescribed notions that exist in sociopolitical accounts, particularly that of people of Color (Jordan, 2015). Examples of these accounts may point out the unequivocal strength of Black men or highlight the promiscuity of Black women. In this way, Black bodies have been impressed with a negative image, and when these negative images begin to permeate spaces like schools, individuals with "authority" utilize those images. In turn, the imaginary existence of Black boys, with particular regard to schools, suggests Black boys are "bad." It's this type of imagination that doesn't allow some of America's students to experience a quality education. It's this imagination that I wish to discuss throughout this paper and use as a call to teacher education for improving the quality assurance of education for Black boys.

## The Imaginary Existence

The narrative that many of us heard during our teacher education programs went something like this:*"Don't smile. Don't laugh. Be stone faced. It is extremely important that you remember this, especially, when working with urban kids."* Urban in this case is code for children of Color. Hearing such statements can only translate to: Don't act happy. Urban kids need to see that their teacher means business. The message that is delivered from our teacher education programs to our most bright-eyed, interested generation of teachers basically asks teachers to mimic what would be seen in a prison, especially when working with *urban* students. The imaginary existence of Black male bodies (or Black bodies generally) calls for teachers to present in a

way that reinforces Black boys as problematic, even if shown a smile. The imagined ideas of Black male bodies, while not necessarily verbally communicated, but nevertheless existent in school policies, suggests to the Black male bodies sitting in classrooms or walking school hallways, “you are not wanted here.” Ultimately, schools have become sites of exclusion for Black males.

Schools are premiere sites for establishing evaluative (and often punitive) guidelines for appropriate behavior. These guidelines, which have been created and maintained based on a particular lens, blind the users of the guidelines to the fact that they are (re)inscribing racial and gender stereotypes to students who look similar to “the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society" (Noguera, 2008, p.114). The education community has allowed for policies like zero-tolerance to take over and create a system in which we dismiss our youth of Color and allow school personnel to imagine an existence that mislabels Black males as bad and unworthy.

The Black boys that I used to teach spent a lot of time in the principal’s office for talking back, not paying attention, excessively calling out, and uncontrollable movements - normal kid stuff. But, what I saw as normal behavior were notable infractions worth documenting, calling their parents, and sometimes even requiring removal from the classroom. They had earned themselves the label of “those kids.” “Oh- you have those boys,” is the first thing I heard from one of the assistant principals on the first day of the 2015-2016 school year. “Those boys never had recess last year. This one - his mother is on drugs. This one lives in a shelter. This one’s mother doesn’t like White people. And this one, well, you’ll see. Just be careful with this group.” This assistant principal was consumed with making sure my students continued to exist within the imaginary.

The Black boys in my class were full of energy, spontaneous beings who wanted to answer every question before I had the chance to ask it. They wanted to rap lyrics during the middle of class time because the music in their head was just too much to contain. They wanted all of my attention and then some. They wanted to learn just like everyone else in my room. But, my Black boys had been struggling their entire schooling lives to exist without the caveat of being considered bad. Laura (2014) tells us that “we pick up language and ideas that, with repetition, tend to become the reality that we live” (p. 36). My boys were convinced that they were bad, and there was no use in them trying because everyone had seen them that way. They were aware of how they existed within the imagination of others, yet they had not developed the necessary tools to be able to resist the imaginary world in which they exist. They had not learned how to use the imagination of others as sites for their resistance in order to reclaim their identity as intelligent Black males who do not wish to be over-policed. In order for Black boys and other students of Color to develop tools of resistance they need to be loved into an existence outside of the imaginary.

## Call to Teacher Education

As teacher educators, it should be our sole responsibility to prepare teachers to teach with love. In order to do this, we must engage our budding teachers in work that pushes them to be uncomfortable and explore the bounds of unlearning their biases, particularly around racial superiority. 80% of in-service public-school teachers are White, which is indicative of the type of individuals that complete certification programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017; Ingersoll & May, 2011). Acknowledging the role White teachers may play in reproducing racial ascriptions in schools is to confront their Whiteness and understand the dichotomy that is created because of it. As Lewis (2003) argues, “Whites need to learn more not only about the reality of racial inequality but also about their own roles in its reproduction” (p. 38). In our teacher education programs broadly, we are seeing approaches that do not encourage full exploration of teacher identity and notions of Whiteness, where the focus is on the teacher or teacher candidate rather than students and their community. White pre-service teachers are in need of coursework and experiences that facilitate the dismantling of dominant, superior ideas and ideologies that continue to marginalize Black males and other students of Color (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012; Jordan, 2017). Teacher educators need to position themselves to educate pre-service teachers (and also do the work) to explore their attitudes and understandings about racial ascriptions and the influence it has on their teaching practice (Cochran-Smith, Davis, & Fries, 2004; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Harding (2005) argues, “White teachers serving students of Color must be committed to putting their confusion about race, class, and power on the table” (p.77). It’s through these intersections that individuals can really grapple with how their being has influence over their view of the world. For teachers, it impacts instructional choices and how students are thought about and treated in the classroom. Teacher education must be deliberate in teaching about race, racism, supremacy, White privilege, etc. Teacher educators are also responsible for understanding their own narrative as raced, classed, and gendered people in order to have the profound impact necessary for pre-service teacher growth.

At the outset of this article I stated that schools have become sites of exclusion for Black males and other students of Color. Not only are discipline policies negatively impacting Black students learning gains, teacher perception of Black *bodies* has resulted in negative school experiences. The bodies of Black children are feared and therefore policed. In order for teachers to discontinue the reproduction of racial inequality they must “unlearn those histories, ideologies, values, and social relations” (Giroux, 1997, p. 299) that have long maintained the negative perceptions of Black people and other people of Color. Teacher education holds the responsibility of facilitating the work necessary for unlearning the histories, ideologies, values and social relations that continue to implicate the narrative of Black boys as bad, so they no longer continue to exist in the imaginary.

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