

The Mechanism & Effects of Intersectionality in the American Educational System

Against Black, Female Students

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Education inequality is amongst the most severe types of racial inequalities throughout the United States. Like many other areas of inequality in America, education inequality is deeply correlated with race. As a form of systematic racism, the discrepancy in access to resources and opportunities for Black students in comparison to their White counterparts, leads to inequality outside the walls of a classroom. America was founded by social institutions engrained with bias and imbalance, that still reinforce inequality today. Statistics have repeatedly demonstrated that Black children are more likely to live in low-income neighborhoods with poorer school districts than White children, and thus, exposed to less opportunities and resources. This contributes to the polarization between social classes throughout the country, making it more likely for people to remain in the social class that they were born into. Therefore, Black individuals are more likely to remain of a low socioeconomic status throughout their lifetimes.

Gender and race are two central factors that impact the development one's self-concept; the way an individual understands and perceives themselves. An individual's identity can subject them to various prejudices within American culture. America has made strides to become more culturally diverse, but through these efforts, discrimination has become more apparent and less tolerated. It can be seen that racism is becoming less tolerated by the way the Black Lives Matter movement and support has grown, and more and more people are beginning to educate themselves in order to break patterns of racism. Certain races are more at risk for prejudice and oppression, specifically the Black community. Intersectionality demonstrates how racial

prejudice against the Black community can be paired with gender discrimination to highlight the hardships experienced specifically by Black females. This cross-section of gender and race influences how a person is treated in various aspects of society, especially within the classroom setting. Teacher racial bias, negative teacher-student interaction, and disproportionate disciplinary measures generate and sustain an oppressive classroom environment, which impedes upon the Black, female student's academic performance and experience, which can ultimately lead to a higher risk of incarceration and hinder her future.

I. Intersectionality in the educational system.

Both Black men and women are labeled with certain characteristics that influence how non-Blacks interact with them. For instance, Black men are profiled as "hypermasculine," so their being Black somehow "intensifies" their masculinity (Marx & Wade 2018). While Black men are over-masculinized, Black women are seen as less feminine, which is polar opposite to the fragile, feminine White woman image. Research suggests that this stereotype can be attributed to America's history of slavery. Enslaved women were abused, raped, and treated as less than human by their White male owners. Such treatment did not allow for them to be seen as delicate, pure women by society, for this would have made the behavior of slave-owners irreprehensible (Marx & Wade 2018). These stereotypes were established and perpetuated by a society seeking to justify and reinforce racist ideologies that allowed for slavery to exist and be profitable. Though slavery has been abolished, these stereotypes remain ever-present.

The response and justification of the American Southern society and its dominant figures -- White males, has molded the way society perceives and interacts with Black women today. Black women are seen as loud, aggressive, angry, ill-tempered, less feminine, and more

sexualized beings. Their status as both Black and female places them in a group highly vulnerable to marginalization without support or protection from policy. These perceptions can contribute to unfair treatment by authoritative figures (law enforcement and education professionals) towards Black females, both in and out of the classroom. Research from the Anxiety and Depression Association of America suggests that Black women in general, are at a greater risk for social anxiety among other types, as well as more intense symptoms of anxiety than their white counterparts (adaao.org). These stereotypes can not only be harmful to mental health, but they defeminize and ultimately, dehumanize Black women, and can therefore, interfere with the way they are perceived and treated in society, specifically the education environment.

Black female students can be subject to differential treatment as a result of these historical stereotypes and prejudices. Studies have shown, regardless of race, teachers have less patience and lower expectations for their Black students. Unintentional racial bias in conjunction with a skewed perception of the student's potential can inevitably interfere with the teacher's treatment of the student. Thus, hindering the student's academic potential and their perception of their potential, as relationships fostered within the classroom among peers and between teacher and student heavily impact the student's tendency to participate and engage. Research suggests that a teachers' narratives have shown to be critical to the academic success and opportunities afforded to Black female students (Neal-Jackson 2018). The nature of the connections a student forms in the classroom and throughout their education experience can affect their relationships, opportunities, and self-esteem outside the academic setting.

II. Dehumanization and its impact on educators' perception and punitive measures taken against Black, female students.

This historical dehumanization of Black women in the United States, which has been seen as a means of justifying the White man's crime, may influence a Black female's classroom experiences and interactions (Joseph et al. 2019). A study by Joseph et al. conducted interviews with ten Black, female middle school and high school students, and analyzed their responses regarding what they believed to be good mathematics teachers and positive classroom experiences. The field of mathematics is not an area that Black women are included in or even encouraged to become a part of. Though the study is focused upon the mathematics field, the students' responses to different experiences and interactions within the classroom setting shed a light on their perception of teachers and how they believe their teachers to perceive them. Their responses reveal indicators within the classroom that impact their experience, regardless of subject area, such as teacher-student interaction and punitive disciplinary action.

For example, the students in the study explained how they appreciated teachers who exhibited more patience and compassion towards them when they did not understand a concept, as opposed to being accused of inattentiveness. Responses of this nature suggest these students have been subject to harsher punitive measures because of "adultization," which is a phenomenon that takes away a black girl's innocence (Joseph et al. 2019). "Adultization" could be another symptom of pre-Civil War American society's justification of slavery and the abuse and rape of young, enslaved women. Young, Black females may be treated with less compassion and patience, and more aggression and severity because of this phenomenon. The study suggests

educators have been shown to respond more harshly to Black female students' behaviors as a result.

The researchers of this study propose that teachers apply Tuitt's (2003) "inclusive pedagogy," as a means of making marginalized groups of students feel engaged and accepted within the classroom. An "inclusive pedagogy" includes a utilization of personal narratives, social interaction, sharing power between the teacher and students, as well as dialogical teacher-student interactions (Joseph et al. 2019). These four components of the pedagogy allow for a more open, encouraging, and positive classroom environment for marginalized students. Utilization of this pedagogy could make marginalized students, specifically Black females, feel more included and celebrated in the classroom, and thus, foster a more positive relationship between teacher and student, as well as a more positive student outlook towards education and self-perception.

In a review of educational research, Neal-Jackson critiques previous studies of the Black female student's experience, and offers a new account for the Black female student's educational experience. The researchers studied the disproportionate amount of dress code violations experienced by Black females in relation to their White counterparts, which indicates that Black females are perceived as hypersexual and adultized (Neal-Jackson 2018). School officials in past studies were also more inclined to discuss the Black female students' social behavior or 'inferior' study skills, as opposed to their academic performance and capabilities, which in some instances were competitive to their White, male peers (Neal-Jackson 2018). Therefore, as the study contends, the instances of prejudice and inequality in a Black female student's academic

experience are not solely based upon race or gender alone, but the intersectionality of the two identities.

The review concluded that Black female students perceived themselves and their abilities drastically differently than their school officials, who underestimated them or downplayed their abilities and potential. The students saw themselves as ambitious, intelligent individuals, while their teachers viewed them as difficult and unfocused in the classroom. Instead, the school officials focused on the students' social behaviors, such as helpfulness (Neal-Jackson 2018). As opposed to praising one of the student's academic performance, a teacher noted how much she helped struggling classmates. Neal-Jackson noted the school officials' perceptions of their Black female students seemed to be motivated by the same racist ideas that are present in society, like Black women are supportive, subordinate figures meant to serve White people (Neal-Jackson 2018). This type of neglect can harm the Black female student's self-concept and promote a more negative education experience, in which a student is more motivated to dropout.

The following qualitative study performed by Connie Wun in 2016, demonstrates the way that anti-Black racism is engrained throughout American culture and policy. The study analyzes the discipline practices at a suburban high school in California, towards Black female students, who made up 9% of the school population, but 26% of female students with discipline records. Interviews were conducted with 15 Black female students for the study, and revealed that the students were subject to punishment for seemingly average behaviors such as chewing gum, drinking Gatorade, and making jokes in class. The study concluded that racist, anti-Black ideologies translate into the disciplinary policies and action taken in the education system, specifically against Black females. Anti-Black discipline in schools is the excessive utilization of

“zero-tolerance” policies, which originated in the 60s in response to political protests for desegregation (Wun 2016).

According to a study conducted by Jayanti Owens et al. in 2018, regarding racial disparities in school discipline, schools with a larger population of Black students are more likely to utilize these “zero-tolerance” policies than schools with a larger population of White students. This usage of harsh policy could be a result of the “adultization” of the Black female, and it can also contribute to the high incarceration rate of Black adolescents. The study found that there is a 20 percentage point gap between suspension rates of Black and White students, that begins as early as elementary school. Through decomposition analyses Owens et al. found that approximately 50% of this gap is because of the differential treatment of Black students who demonstrate the same behaviors as their White counterparts when entering school. This differential treatment is demonstrated and analyzed in studies previously mentioned such as the suburban high school in California, in which Black female students were subject to punitive measures for average behaviors (Wun 2016). Owens et al.’s study suggests that race and the severity of disciplinary sanctions seem to align more repeatedly than the severity of the sanction in comparison to its crime.

Society’s notion that “Blackness” is inherently threatening and disruptive, perpetuates such harsh disciplinary response such as expulsion and suspension, which Black female students are six times as likely to be subjected to (Joseph et al.). Wun explains the history of excessive force against Black females, illustrating that it aligns with the discriminating historical, racial notion that Black females are aggressive rather than delicate or feminine. Wun suggests and concludes from this study that the excessive punishment and disciplinary action taken against

Black female students is reflective of a more expansive social structure, and that is the Black female existence's insignificance within the social hierarchy, which makes them more structurally vulnerable and easily targeted by policy. Such a marginalized group of the education system ought to be protected and supported by policy.

Some question whether classroom racial symmetry influences the classroom experiences of students. Racial symmetry between teacher and student has been discussed as a potential means of solving teacher-student miscommunication, a study conducted by Scott et al. in 2018, analyzed the drivers of racial disparities in punitive measures, and concluded that racial asymmetry between teacher and student may not necessitate negative feedback from a teacher in the classroom. Meaning if a teacher is White and their students are Black, or vice versa, this asymmetry does not dictate negative feedback. However, the study did indicate that both Black and White teachers have lower expectations for Black students, which is indicative that implicit, racial bias is more firmly rooted in our society and the education system than one might think (Scott et al. 2018). Black students were found to be more 'disruptive' and likely to participate in 'off-task behaviors' than their White counterparts in the eyes of their teachers. These types of discrepancies in the perception of Black students' behavior can indicate the teacher's expected response.

III. Classroom environment and student mental health

The inequality and disadvantages perpetuated by racial discrimination in the education system can also yield negative mental health effects for students in marginalized groups. Research suggests Black students are more likely to experience academic anxiety heightened by racial stereotypes predicting their capabilities, which hinders their overall academic performance

and their academic trajectory (Wasserberg 2017). This anxiety is a contributing factor to the racial test score gap in America, in which the average Black student scores 75% lower than the average White student (brookings.edu). Certain districts have applied new standardized test-focused curriculum and pedagogy in response to this gap. These measures include multiple practice tests and state benchmark-focused lesson activities, which can interfere with the student's ability to analyze and reflect on literary texts. Research suggests these measures may be counterintuitive to test scores and the student's overall development in critical thinking, reading, writing, and mathematics.

A study conducted amongst high-scoring students in an urban, elementary school in a low-income area with lower test scores, examines students' emotional response and academic performance to the standardized test-focused curriculum. Non-academic factors contribute to the test-score gap among White and Black children, however, the additional stress that constant emphasis on scoring well imposes on children hinders their academic performance and can establish a negative and harmful educational experience (Wasserberg 2017). The study found that standardized test-focused curriculum actually draws more attention to the racial gap and racial stereotypes associated with test scores. Students in the study revealed they were self-conscious about their personal scoring as well as the overall level of their school because of the way the outside community might perceive them, as the scores and rankings of the schools were published in the newspapers.

The students in the study demonstrated an awareness of stereotypes held against them when the high-scoring students conveyed concern and impatience towards the students that scored lower. They engaged with the very stereotypes they themselves were adamant on

rejecting, such as students from lower-income areas wore their pants low to school, were ‘bad,’ and could not score as high as other districts (Wasserberg 2017). While the high-scoring students distinguished themselves from these stereotypes associated with their race, they simultaneously accepted them when participating in them against students in their school with lower scores. Students demonstrated a specific concern with how White people would perceive them and their school because of their test scores, which exemplifies students’ awareness to stereotypes and how it impacts their performance (Wasserberg 2017). The students’ awareness of stereotype threat was heightened by the emphasis on test scores and district ranking, and they demonstrated conscientiousness of the outside communities’ perception of them as Black students.

IV. How educational experience impacts the future.

A Black female’s educational experience can seriously impact the direction of her life. Disproportionate disciplinary measures and school-related arrests against Black female students in the public-school system can result in what is referred to as the School-to-Prison Pipeline, which is the increased likelihood minors from disadvantaged backgrounds will become incarcerated (Hassan & Carter 2020). Black female students are more likely to receive harsh punishments, suspension, and police intervention than their White female peers, and such punishments take them away from educational opportunities as well as ruin any chance of a safe, positive learning environment of structure and support for the student. Discrimination through academic disciplinary policies can enforce the criminalization of black female minors, who already experience “adultization” from society, and can cause them to have more encounters with law enforcement at a young age (Hassan & Carter 2020).

Negative law enforcement encounters and discrimination in the education system can prompt these marginalized students to drop out of school altogether, putting them at an even higher risk of incarceration, unemployment, poverty, and substance abuse (Hassan & Carter 2020). Black youth face a higher likelihood of negative encounters with law enforcement, and when the experience takes place at school, a place which is supposed to make students feel safe and respected, this can foster negative feelings towards authoritative figures, like teachers, as well as a negative outlook on education. The study concludes that these trends are especially concerning considering the fastest increasing population within the juvenile justice system is Black females. This correlation between incarceration rates and the discrimination and criminalization within the public-school system, against Black female students is no coincidence, as Black females have been shown to be subject to more frequent, harsh punitive measures. Such measures are consequences of implicit bias that occurs in the classroom, which the education system has yet to adequately respond to. The lack of response to the biases and stereotypes that fester in the classroom is unfortunately, enables these concerning trends to continue (Hassan & Carter 2020).

Conclusion

An individual's educational experience can be a transformative aspect in their young life, and when this experience is negative and damaging to the student it can impact the direction of their future. Differential treatment based upon race and gender can derail a student's academic trajectory, putting them at risk for economic instability, substance abuse, issues with law enforcement, etc. These threats escalate for Black students who are already disadvantaged, generally speaking. The intersectionality of race and gender within the American education

system perpetuates layers of injustice and inequality outside the classroom. It is not until we can understand the gendered racism Black women experience and acknowledge the serious impacts it has on their livelihood and the racial inequality that persists in American society, that effective change can be made within the education system.

Of course, substantial change requires policy, but there are changes within the education system that can be made presently and effectively by teachers and administrators to improve the classroom environment and education experience of students who have been historically and are presently marginalized. This will aid students to break through the glass ceiling and promote economic mobilization throughout the country, striding towards racial equality. By encouraging classroom participation and engagement through an “inclusive pedagogy” (Tuit 2003), education professionals can minimize the negative experiences of this marginalized group within the classroom. Since punitive responses towards Black, female students has shown to be a strong indicator of the student’s academic success, experience, and self-view, an in-depth review and analysis of the history of disciplinary action taken against this group is absolutely necessary in order to begin to improve the experiences of Black, female students and decrease the inequality gap.

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