
RACE AND GENDER AT THE CROSSROADS: AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALES IN SCHOOL

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Research has tended to focus on two separate issues in studying the education and schooling of African American females. On the one hand, researchers have focused on the plight of girls in school, either minimizing race and/or ethnic distinctions among groups of girls (e.g., Sadker & Sadker, 1994), or simply ignoring these distinctions altogether. Conversely, other researchers have tended to focus on the “crisis” situation of the African American male student, a situation that has been likened to that of an “endangered species.” In the mix, the status of African American females in the educational system have been ignored, overlooked, and minimized. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of these two divergent approaches in studying (or not) the education of African American women, and discussion of future research directions.

Are All the Girls White?

The experience of African American females in American schools as differentiated by the group experience of Blacks as well as that of “females” is a subject that has received relatively little attention by both scholars and the media. In contrast, considerable attention has been paid to the special problems of African American males in schools as well as the more general “gender equity” problem in education. Very little recent data has been published that examines students’ experience of schooling by sex, race, or ethnicity (American Association of University Women, 1992). Despite the fact that “understanding how race and class influence school experiences and access to educational opportunity has been an abiding interest of social theorists as well as educational practitioners” (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, p. 317), the intersection of race, class, and gender have been largely ignored, especially the manner the intersection of these variables differently affects African American females and males in school.

When researchers have turned their attention to issues of gender and education, it can be argued that feminists and other scholars have largely overlooked race and class variables when examining the effects of schooling on different groups of women. In these analyses, scholars have focused on female students as if all females were homogenous disregarding race, ethnicity, and class variables. Smith (2000) asserts that “the topic of schooling as an institution productive of inequalities – of gender, as well as race and class – has never been, as I believe it should be, a major issue for

feminism (p. 1147).”

In 1994, the husband and wife team of the late Myra Sadker and David Sadker published a groundbreaking book, Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat Girls, after numerous classroom observations from elementary school through higher education. The Sadkers collected data on patterns of classroom instruction, looking at classes that were both racially integrated as well as those which were racially segregated. The girls that were observed are presumed to represent all girls in American public schools, although in reality the majority of girls that the Sadkers observed in classrooms across America’s frontiers did not represent the diversity of girls in American schools on a number of important variables: race, class, or ethnicity. In their analyses, virtually no mention is made of how different racial and/or ethnic groups of females and males are treated in the classroom. In his critique of the Sadker groundbreaking 20-year study of classroom observations, Hopkins (1997) argues that the authors were not explicit about which girls were being cheated and even when their work included students and teachers of different race and ethnic categories, their “groundbreaking” work remains culture-specific. Consistent with this observation, Hopkins (1997) suggests that their work should be more aptly titled, “Failing at Fairness: How America’s Schools Cheat American European Girls, Isolate American African Girls, and Terminate American African Males.”

The American Association of University Women’s report, How Schools Shortchange Girls, published in 1992, represented the first time that a study of major findings on girls and education was undertaken by a major research center, the Wellesley Center for the Research on Women at Wellesley College. The report was a synthesis of all the available research on the subject of girls and schools at the time. Additionally, the authors attempted to include as much as possible the existing research on the differences found among girls of various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic and/or cultural groups. The only limitation on this last point was the overall lack of research that had actually been conducted on groups of girls that deviated from the White, middle-class norms that dominated the literature until that point in time.

A more recent publication, Trends in Educational Equity of Girls and Women (Bae, Choy, Geddes, Sable & Snyder, 2000), used data from surveys conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics to examine trends in educational equity for girls and women in America’s schools. The report provides statistical information on a number of important educational markers such as achievement, curriculum issues, opinions, etc. The data that is presented is broken down almost exclusively by the variable of gender alone. Rarely is there a breakdown of the data by race or ethnicity (exceptions include the trends of high school dropouts and high school completion for childrearing teens – two risk factors that threaten school completion; as well as three other non-risk factors). In consideration of the fact that the data resulted from

surveys conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, the primary federal entity for collecting, analyzing, and reporting educational data in the United States, it is odd that this report would present its data for “girls” and “women” without providing race or ethnicity breakdowns.

In a recent article, Sadker (1999) attempts to provide an update on gender biases in education, yet persists in his use of “girl” and “boy” to represent the vastly differing experiences of America’s youth in schools. Little mention is made of the varying educational issues moderated by race, ethnicity, and/or class in schools. The problem of “all the women are White” continues to dominate the area of research on gender and education, leaving African American and other racial minority women out of the equation. Dill (1987) indicates that White bourgeois women have been considered as representative of the category “women” with the implication that this category is racially and culturally homogenous. Unfortunately, this “color blindness” continues to dominate the research on girls and women’s education in the United States.

Are All the Boys Black?

In general, “Black children are heirs to the effects of the bigotry and racial prejudice that have guided national policy prior to the 1960’s and have resurfaced during the 1980’s” (Haynes & Comer, 1990, p. 105). Unfortunately, bigotry and racial prejudice did not die, but continues to rear its ugly head in the 21st century. While it cannot be disputed that a disproportionate number of African American children fail to successfully navigate the testy waters of the American educational system, the focus since the late 1980’s on African American males has dominated the popular media as well as the conceptualization in the scholarly press as one of pathology, failure, dysfunction, and hopelessness (Gordon, 1999).

Earlier research on the schooling of African American males in lower elementary indicate that he is more likely to interact with other African American males, more likely to have nonacademic interactions with peers, more likely to be labeled deviant and described more negatively than White males, and less likely to receive positive feedback from teachers in comparison to other race-gender groups (Coates, 1972; Eaves, 1975; Grant, 1986; Simpson & Erickson, 1983; Taylor, 1979). In upper elementary and junior high, previous research found that African American males were more likely to be in the lowest academic track; more likely to be isolated socially and academically from White students; more likely than White males to be sent to the principal’s office for a verbal confrontation with a teacher; and also more likely to be judged inaccurately by teachers (Grant, 1986; Irvine, 1986).

Additionally, African American children, especially males, are overrepresented in the

use of corporal punishment, suspensions, and expulsion from school (Meier, Stewart & England, 1989). African American children and youth, especially males, are over-represented in special education programs for students with learning disabilities, severe emotional or behavioral disorders, and mental disabilities (Patton, 1998). African Americans have more than double their representation (approximately 32%) in the total population of school-aged children in special education programs (Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997).

Analyses of data in the New Orleans school district in the late 1980's revealed that African American males accounted for disproportionate numbers of expulsions (80%), nonpromotions (58%), suspensions (65%) and dropouts (45%), which, in comparison to their proportion of the district population (43%), is a bit alarming. The picture for African American girls, while not as dramatic as that of African American males, is no less encouraging: 20% of expulsions, 34% of nonpromotions, 29% of suspensions, and 41% of dropouts – while accounting for 44% of the school population (Garibaldi, 1992).

In a study of average academic track students from five different middle schools in a large mid-Atlantic city, it was found that there were no significant differences in peer relations strain for African American males and females at time 1 (beginning of the school year); but, over time, gender differences emerged with males experiencing more gender and peer relations strain than females (Fenzel, Magaletta & Peyrot, 1997). This finding is consistent with previous research that showed African American males to be more vulnerable to peer difficulties in school than females (Moseley & Lex, 1990; Obiakor, Algozzine & Ford, 1993).

The focus on the “conspiracy to destroy Black boys” (Kunjufu, 1995) or the objective to “kill them before they grow” (Porter, 1997) is reflective of how Mirza (1999) suggests African American men are perceived in the minds of mainstream society:

Blackness, as a marker for the wicked, the spiritual, the voluptuous, and the sinful, lies hidden – an unenunciated terror in the White mind. Black masculinity seems to conjure up all that we are afraid to talk about. Sex and race are at the center of most of all our innermost desires, prejudices, and fears (p. 138).

African American males then become a danger, a threat, a terror to be destroyed.

Similarly, the attention that African American scholars have paid to this issue of “endangered” African American males distorts the picture that appropriately applies to a minority of males in the United States. This skewed focus suggests that the majority of African American males are being overlooked, as well as a neglect of the

impact of other issues such as age, class, geographic differences, and gender on educational status. African American females, one could argue, are also overlooked in this equation. According to McClendon and Wigfield (1998) much of the recent research on gender differences in African American children's achievement too narrowly focuses on the problems specifically associated with males and overlooks the strengths and weaknesses related to academic achievement of African American females.

It is without a doubt that African American children, particularly males, are at risk in the American educational system. However, the considerable focus and attention that has been directed towards the unique plight of the African American male does not preclude African American female students from being at risk as well. Schooling as an institution in America reproduces and is a reproduced microcosm of the larger society where inequities along gender, race, and class lines are firmly embedded (Smith, 2000). The public school system directly and indirectly reproduces these inequalities; and African American females, holding joint membership in two historically oppressed status categories (being African American and being female) are not immune to these risks.

Those Loud Black Girls?

The successful, achieving, and independent African American female student is frequently the image that flashes across the popular and scholarly landscape of America, and becomes part of our collective consciousness, just as the "endangered" African American male. Parallel to the assumption that adversity and oppression have led the African American woman to forge strong multidimensional roles while simultaneously stripping African American men of the prerogatives of manhood (Hunter & Davis, 1992), is a similar assumption underlying the dialogue on African American education – that is, adverse forces have allowed African American women to emerge "triumphant" in educational achievement and attainment, while these same forces have disenfranchised African American males. Instead of stimulating a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of social variables as race and gender have on the education of African American females and males, these assumptions often encourage a dividedness among education scholars and activists.

The research on African American females and education is still in its infancy. Earlier research on the differential school experiences of African American males and females found that females in the lower elementary grades received less positive feedback; are more likely to be praised for social skills than academic skills; are more likely to be ignored by teachers or more likely to interact with teachers in brief, task-related contacts; are more likely to be asked by the teacher to help other classmates with nonacademic tasks; are more likely to fight or to retaliate when confronted

verbally or physically; and are more likely to play a “go-between” role for teachers than other gender-race groups (Byalick & Bersoff, 1974; Damico & Scott, 1985; Grant, 1984; Grant, 1986). Furthermore, African American females are more subject to attempts by both African American and White males to force them into periphery service roles; receive fewer feedback statements; and receive fewer response opportunities in class than any other race-gender group (Grant, 1986; Irvine, 1986). These findings corroborate research on teacher-student interactions which revealed that African American females in the upper elementary grades received significantly less total teacher feedback, less positive feedback, and fewer response opportunities than African American girls in the lower elementary grades, a pattern that did not occur with any of the other gender/race categories (Irvine, 1986). By the time African American girls reach the upper elementary grades, they have received increasingly less feedback from teachers and perhaps have become more socialized to expect less from teachers as well. In their junior high years, some research suggests that the earlier trend of benign negligence on behalf of teachers persists, and African American females become “invisible” and more likely to work alone as well as be left out of friendship networks (Irvine, 1986).

African American females are often believed to be the academic superstars in comparison to African American males. There is some evidence that African American females do perform better in school, and have a significantly higher grade point average than males (Ford, 1996); are generally identified by teachers as better students (Weiler, 2000); believe strongly that school and schooling is a primary means for achieving vertical mobility in the existing social system (Fordham, 1996); have high scores of scholastic competence (Erkut, Manu, Fields & Sing, 1997); and report persistently high self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu & Kurtz, 1997).

Despite these positive attributes associated with African American females, there is research that suggests that African American females are at greater risk for underachievement than males; particularly, gifted African American girls (Ford, 1996). This group of African American gifted girls has been found to be at greater risk than White females for underachievement, dropping out, and school failure (Ford, 1996). The American Association of University Women’s report (1992) found that low-SES African American high school females tested no better than a comparable group of African American males and that high-SES males clearly do better academically than females. In desegregated schools, African American girls do not do as well as boys in this environment, often feeling socially isolated and/or excluded (AAUW, 1992). African American girls’ “place” in the classroom as the “rule enforcer,” “go between” and the “caregiver” is different from other children (Grant, 1994). These roles place greater emphasis on social rather than academic skills of African American girls. In this context, “different” does not mean being necessarily “better.”

A number of researchers have cautioned and rightly so, the interpretations of these findings. Erkut et al. (1997) recognize that girls from different racial and ethnic groups use different standards to judge their self-worth. Furthermore, they argue that one needs to consider such factors as level of danger in one's neighborhood, recency of immigration to the United States, as well as the nature of family boundaries, in understanding how different groups of girls perceive their competency (Erkut et al., 1997). In their report of what "works" for girls in school, Cohen, Blanc, Christman, Brown and Sims (1996) discovered that "a startling diversity of girls whose different constructions of self and school made problematic the notion of what we meant by 'working' and who we meant by 'girls'" (p. 9).

Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class: Future Research Directions

Much of the existing research and discussion of the education of African American females has been guided by a race comparative paradigm (largely comparisons with Whites) or on a much smaller scale – gender comparative (with African American males). Crenshaw (1991) argues that race and gender intersect and shape African American women's lives in a multitude of ways that cannot be understood simply by looking at race and gender outcomes independently. The ethnographic work of O'Connor (1999) with African American students in Chicago schools points to the variability in the accounts given by both high-achieving and low-achieving students, which suggests the limitations of relying on a single social identity (e.g., race) as a way of understanding the complexities of academic engagement and performance. In her study, some students who engage in school and do well have constructed a co-narrative of the multiple dynamics of how race, class and gender influence their chances for academic success. One student in her study, Sharon, is an example of a high-achiever who espouses the values of studying hard to do well while simultaneously recognizing that "racism is everywhere," thus developing what O'Connor describes as a "race-dominance" discourse; a finding conceptually at odds with Ogbu's (1974, 1987) and Fordham's (1996) concept of "racelessness" of high-achieving African American students. Despite the fact that her sample included African American students attending predominantly African American schools, O'Connor (1999) acknowledges that there is heterogeneity in any social group and that individual life histories, worldviews, and social identities will differ. Brewer (1999) argues that the "conceptual anchor of recent Black feminist theorizing is the understanding of race, class, and gender as simultaneous forces" (p. 32). Future research on the education, schooling and school experiences of African American females (and males) should consider these and other variables as they help shape the experiences of this group both in and outside of the classroom.

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