

School and Classroom- Level Factors Affecting Black and Latinx Student Learning

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Key terms

Emancipatory education philosophy: The way many African Americans and African American communities view education, which includes ideas about the overall purpose of schooling, the role of teachers, and the focus of content. Historically, this philosophy's mantra was "Education for freedom! Freedom for citizenship, independence, and community uplift".

Black student alienation: The experience Black and Latinx students have of being physically, social-emotionally, and academically disconnected from the curriculum, classroom environment, and learning.

African American Pedagogical Excellence: A framework for talking about the system-wide factors that contribute to positive and healthy educational outcomes for Black and Latinx students. Includes educators actions, interactions and beliefs.

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Introduction: A brief historical walk thru

The nature of systemic racism facing Black and Latinx children in U.S. schools is, at its core, an epistemic and ontological challenge summed up in King (2008)'s examination of teacher education research for racial-social justice in which she concluded, "The crux of the matter is who's social vision prevails [in education and society]" (p. 349). Indeed, the role ideology plays in structural racism is tremendous, and the struggle against flawed knowledge in education in the U.S. can be traced back to the 1800s, immediately following the Civil War during Reconstruction when African Americans were operationalizing the ideas of freedom encapsulated in the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Emancipation Proclamation. Freedom, from an African American perspective meant, in large part, securing education (literacy) for adults and children with a collective and community-centered focus in which free public schooling was a guaranteed right (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 2014; Rooks, 2017). That is, Black education was situated as a freedom-focused endeavor and was designed to produce freedom-minded folks. Further, while White civil society fought against providing free education for the masses, African Americans were organizing for education (Williams, 2007). African Americans built school facilities, enlisted teachers, cultivated a socially responsive and relevant curriculum, and developed routines for managing students (adults and children) that accounted for differing learning needs. This is not surprising considering that prior to European colonization, African peoples across the continent were in the midst of developing a comprehensive system of schooling and education. Indeed, African Americans can be considered the first progressive educators in U.S. society. Yet, Black progressive education ideas were distinctive in that anything defined "progressive" must have freedom at its core. Their progressive education perspectives were culturally and contextually situated and took direction from a powerful emancipatory philosophy (Acosta, 2015;

Acosta et al., 2019; Gordon, 1990; Perry, 2003). As a result, by 1900 approximately half of the southern African American population was reported as literate, a stark contrast from the 1800s when less than 10% of African Americans were illiterate (Anderson, 2010).

Such liberatory consciousness was, and still is, important given the psychologically violent U.S. social landscape developed out of a biocentric belief system that systematically negates African American humanity to promote an alternate ego of conceptual Whiteness wherein Blackness was viewed as intellectually inferior, morally bankrupt, and less human (King, 2008; Wynter, 2004). Bolstered by a desire to revive the plantation economy, Whites were given control of the education of Blacks by the Freedman's Bureau (the U.S. Federal government entity managing Reconstruction efforts in the South). With control over the scope, aims and projected outcomes of education and schooling, Whites institutionalized a system of schooling for children of African descent with the socially constructed racial hierarchy of White superiority/advantage and Black inferiority/disadvantage. This formed the conceptual and practical frame, including curriculum, teaching/teachers, funding, environment, and testing, for example (Anderson, 1988; Rooks, 2017). Encoded in the White architectural framework of Black education (Watkins, 1997) were theories about the in-educability of African Americans, based on their closeness to conceptual Blackness. In summarizing this crisis, Tyack (1974) wrote, "To have been born Black was normally to have been labeled a failure---an inferiority all too often justified by bogus science" (p. 217). Educational administrators, along with White Northern businessmen, relied on flawed research about cultural and racial differences to add to Eurocentric ideations about culturally diverse groups. Now, these racialized ideas grew to include a "natural" course of education aimed to maintain a low wage working class, reduce racial insurgence, and maintain White racial domination (Anderson, 1988; Rooks, 2017). Yet, most African American communities, including Black educators, never lost sight of their emancipatory education philosophies,

policies, and practices. Many schooling policies and practices, reflecting the mainstream, Eurocentric education philosophy, were institutionalized for Black schools to rationalize the inevitability of educational underachievement and alienation of Black children, and easily locate the cause of school failure in the Black child, family, and community (Tyack, 2007, 1974).

The brief history of Black education described above is central to any discussion of institutional racism in education because it de-naturalizes the inequitable structure of our existing educational system. It erodes the myth that education and schooling in the U.S. naturally evolved and therefore schooling system outputs are indicative of nature/biology rather than social intervention. For the purpose of this conceptual paper, the abbreviated history of Black education is important because it highlights three important points about structural racism in education that must be addressed if indeed the goal is to excise structural racism. One, structural racism is an outgrowth of a societal system created in the U.S. to continually create advantages and opportunities for European Americans at the physical, spiritual and material expense of African Americans and other culturally diverse groups. Two, inequitable school-based institutional policies and practices are symptoms of structural racism rather than the cause itself. Three, culturally diverse communities are sources of the critical thought and action needed to design, lead, and evaluate movements to *repossess* and *reposition* (Acosta, 2020) emancipatory knowledges, practices, and values toward the eradication of systemic oppression in education and society.

The problem: Black student alienation

One of the most harmful symptoms of race-based structural inequity in education is its alienating impact on students of color from the learning environment. Culturally diverse students experience alienation across varied system-level (school, district, and education) policies and practices. What's worse is that these alienating experiences are systematic and normalized as "the way" schooling

is done, and uncritically enacted. Ford (2011) argued that the social environment in which learning takes place can enhance or diminish the attitudes, values and behaviors that lead to high achievement (p. 400). Moreover, she asserted that Black and Latinx students are not born underachievers. It is through the onslaught of alienating school-based experiences faced by these students distinctively that they are turned into underachievers as a result of certain school conditions, including a “dull, meager curriculum that destroys the motivation and desire to achieve in school and incompatible teaching and learning styles” (p 400). In the following pages, I provide an emerging conceptualization of Black student alienation with examples that have been documented across the research on Black and Latino/a student school experiences.

Black student alienation inhibits positive academic identity development. Students experience alienation when education policies, practices, and programs do not help them develop positive academic identities, but rather position them as having an oppositional attitudes toward learning. Briefly, academic identity refers to how individuals see and perceive themselves as students in the learning environment, and has a major impact on academic achievement (Howard, 2003). Students of all ages and racial/cultural backgrounds grapple with identity development issues, including academic identity. Students’ academic identity can affect how the school environment is navigated as well as student behavior and choices, and school factors help shape students’ academic identity. While many factors influence the way students view themselves, for Black and Latinx students, academic identity is connected to racial and gender identities (Howard, 2003). Special consideration must be given to Black and Latinx student identity development given their interactions in social environments structured by racial inequalities (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Gray, Hope, & Matthews, 2019; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001). For example, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) found that school context mattered

in the existence of an ¹oppositional culture among students. Their research findings suggested that Black students wanted to do well academically and did not report much peer pressure to hide academic success. Instead, Black students expressed opposition to being placed in advanced classes because they did not want to be forced to assimilate and lose their own cultural and racial identity.

Black student alienation excludes students from access to rigorous content. Students experience alienation when education policies, programs, and practices exclude them from access to rigorous content. This is most evident in the lack of advanced level coursework and program offerings available for Black and Hispanic/Latinx students attending Title 1 schools to participate in, such as calculus and physics. For example, in the Education Department Office of Civil Rights (2016) report, findings demonstrated that Black and Hispanic/Latinx students have disproportionately less access to advanced level math courses. The report indicated that Latinx kids made up a quarter of all public-school students and Black children comprised more than 15 percent of students that year, just a third of high schools where at least three-fourths of students were Black and Latinx offered calculus. Conversely, 56 percent of high schools where Black and Latino kids made up less than a quarter of the student body offered the course. Beyond calculus, the report found that high schools with high numbers of Black and Latinx students were less likely to offer physics, chemistry, and even algebra II. And even in schools where advanced math and science were taught, Black and Latinx students were concentrated in less rigorous courses. While Black and Latinx kids made up 36 percent of students in schools where calculus was offered, they only comprised 21 percent of the students in calculus classes. Students who don't speak English fluently made up 5 percent of students at schools who offered the course, but just 1 percent of those who took it. Importantly, while these numbers are sobering, the greater danger is that

¹ The idea of oppositional culture, or attitude toward school and learning can be attributed to the work of Ogbu & Fordham (1986) who posited that because of institutionalized racism in America, Black students perceive academic achievement as a pursuit of White students.

Black and Latinx students are wise enough to decipher the racialized meanings guiding their lack of access to rigorous content, but are not positioned to speak or act out on these injustices without severe consequences (Love, 2019; Kennedy-Lewis, Acosta, Soutullio, (2018). Such a racialized conundrum contributes to the alienation of Black students from the learning space.

Black student alienation results from discriminatory and harsh school disciplinary practices. Students experience alienation when education policies and practices focus on compliance and control. School disciplinary practices, such as zero-tolerance policies, are a glaring example of policies focused on compliance within a larger discourse of safety which contributes to student alienation. Educators often rationalize discipline policy and practice decisions based on a discourse of safety, which is undergirded by the assumption that students' behavior results from conscious, well-informed choices, and necessitates punishment severe enough to deter potential perpetrators (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014). This discourse of safety is also grounded in the adultification of Black students, in which Black students are perceived to be older and more mature (i.e., less innocent and subject to hormonal and developmental impulsivity). Thus, exclusionary school discipline policies, such as zero tolerance, hypervisibilize and invisibilize Black and Latinx students in ways that further sever their connection to the learning space. Exclusionary discipline practices place students at risk for experiencing a wide range of correlated educational, economic, and social problems, including school avoidance, increased likelihood of dropping out, and involvement with the juvenile justice system. When schools use exclusionary discipline as a way to punish a student, then students not only miss valuable instruction time, but they also lose a sense of belonging and engagement in school. Students can begin to feel like they are not valued and lose interest in their education. These feelings can be compounded when schools send the message that they are singling out

students. School reliance on suspensions for minor infractions harms the positive relationships between teachers and students, which ultimately are crucial to foster a safe learning environment.

Solutions

Currently, education leaders, philanthro-capitalists, and policy-makers invest significant resources in addressing alienation (Rooks, 2017). Initiatives such as school choice programs, creation of competitive federal funding streams (e.g., Race To The Top), elimination of teacher tenure, zero-tolerance discipline policies, school truancy laws, and high stakes, are designed to target alienation as it relates to academic achievement, teacher effectiveness, school attendance and engagement, and school funding.

What's dangerous about these actions is that they leave Black and Latinx children, families, and communities susceptible to deficit perspectives. Deficit perspectives are those in which education leaders situate the problem of Black student alienation integral and endemic to Black children, families, and communities (Valencia, 1997; 2010). That is, Black and Latinx people are the sole or primary contributors to the problems they face. In the section below, I briefly describe one current initiative that schools and school districts are using to address Black student alienation, highlighting the troubling aspects of this initiative, and counter their approach with a culturally relevant, community-centered call to action.

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Accountability

The terms diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) have become buzzwords used to convey a commitment to improving conditions and outcomes for children from historically marginalized groups. Institutions of education have invested heavily in curriculum and training, as well as audits and reporting systems to address and respond to the issues conventionally associated with underperformance among Black and Latinx children. While on the surface, these activities and initiatives appear to reflect a

commitment to children most detrimentally targeted by systemic racism in the school system. Such measures actually reflect a commitment to the needs and interests of the school system itself, with the expectation that once these interests and needs are met, the benefits will “trickle down” to Black and Latinx students, families and communities. Stewart (2016) argued however, “ The rhetoric of diversity and inclusion has not resulted in institutional transformation towards greater equity and justice because diversity and inclusion were never meant to result in equity and justice”. Existing DEI accountability initiatives are guided by a trickle down educational equity theory that suggests that investing in activities that directly benefit education decision-makers with power (teachers, administrators, policy-makers). Trickle down equity is theoretically similar to the theory of trickle- down economics that benefits for the wealthy trickle down to everyone else (Amadeo, 2020).

Historically, the theory of trickle- down economics has been used federally during the Reagan presidential administration in the 1980s, Bush presidential administration in the 1990s, and in the Trump presidential administration in 2017. In all three cases, federal finance laws were enacted based on the logic of trickle- down economics, and close examination indicates that while these policies brought an end to an economic recession, they increased income inequality between wealthy families and poor families, which disproportionately affecting Black and Latinx people. In other words, most American families experienced an increase in income, but wealthy Whites exponentially benefited from the tax breaks and increased governmental spending. Income increased for poor people by 6% between 1979 and 2005, and increased 80% for wealthy people during the same time period. Thus, while trickle- down economics theory and practices were used to address world economic downturns, given the focus on retaining (increasing or expanding) power in the hands of a few. Outcomes are marginal for Black and Latinx people, and exacerbate inequity.

In similar ways, trickle down educational equity theory and practices have produced tremendous economic benefits for Whites in positions of power in education. For example, textbook publishers have made hundreds of millions of dollars selling instructional materials designed to “close the achievement gap”. Supplemental educational service providers have secured hefty district and state-level contracts with school districts to deliver academic, social-emotional, and parent engagement programming to poor Black and Latinx students in the name of equity initiatives. Schools and school districts have received large grants from non-profit groups, grants intended to address racial inequities through teacher professional development and diversity trainings. In each of these examples, DEI initiatives are treated as inputs to restabilize educational recessions that manifest in poor student performance on standardized tests. In other words, the goal is to insert just enough “diversity, equity, and inclusion” to restore and return the education system to normal wherein the schooling experiences of Black and Latinx children are designed to produce workers, not critical thinkers. Moreover, DEI practices are overwhelmingly geared toward providing direct benefits (money, awards, advanced degrees, certifications, instructional resources, etc..) to those in education who already exert considerable power (lawmakers, superintendents, school district administrators, building level administrators, teachers) in hopes that what these folks will act benevolently and invest their benefits in Black and Latinx people. More times than not, however, DEI benefits afforded to those in power help to establish their careers and credibility in ways that expand and increase their authority status on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion exponentially. Yet, improved and increased positive outcomes for Black and Latinx children, families and communities in terms of academic achievement, affirming schooling experiences and social-emotional support occurs on a significantly smaller scale. Thus, DEI accountability efforts are reduced to object status susceptible to commodification and exploitation. That is, a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion as a possible solution to Black student alienation is repurposed as a primarily money-

generating mechanism to keep school systems functioning, rather than produce meaningful, positive outcomes for Black and Latinx people.

Make no mistake, diversity, equity and inclusion are important to any institution, including education. However, DEI should be the outcomes (or output) of approaches to solve the problem of Black student alienation, not the inputs. Situating DEI as the intended output means we divest or defund trickle-down educational equity initiatives bound within DEI accountability thinking and practice in education. Instead, schools and school districts should reinvest DEI resources into justice-oriented, freedom-minded initiatives that provide immediate benefits to Black and Latinx students and communities.

Call to action

Specific actions should be taken immediately help eradicate Black student alienation include:

- 1. Pursue Emancipatory Research & Evaluation.** In order to make sense of the experiences of Black and Latinx children in schools, we must unpack students' schooling experiences within the context of the cultures, climates and structures of the schools they attend. We have to examine how school factors constrain or expand the possibilities for how students will experience school, and we must engage in this examination from the view of Black and Latinx students and communities. West-Olatunji (2020) explained that emancipatory evaluation is foundational to eradicating Black student alienation because such an investigation, "places culture at the center of inquiry to honor and validate peoples' culturally diverse ways of knowing and being, and privileges the voices of those under investigation" (p. 5). Such an approach is reflective of centuries of African Diasporic problem-solving approaches reflected in the freedom-minded activism of W.E.B. Dubois in

his 1902 sociological study of the Philadelphia Negro, Amical Cabral in his leadership work of the African Independence Party in the 1960s, and Anna Julia Cooper in her writings on Black women in the South in 1892, and countless others. What these evaluations, and many others, have in common, as with an emancipatory evaluation model, is sharing of the societal and interpersonal issues evident in student schooling experiences from the worldview position of the community of focus using community language, definitions, and frames of sense-making. Armed with culture and community centered knowledge that emerges from emancipatory evaluation, schools and school districts can develop more complete understandings of the existing challenges that Black student alienation presents for Black and Latinx students. Educators and policymakers can then invest in resources that appropriately address community issues and result in greater diversity, equity and inclusion in student schooling outcomes. Black and Latinx communities should demand that research and evaluation follow an emancipatory pattern. Data driven decision-making is a staple of schooling practices. However, existing data gathering approaches often disregard community cultural knowledge. Black and Latinx communities should engage educators at all levels in dialogue and action that results in a reduction of colorblind data driven decisions and an increase in the use of emancipatory evaluation and research. Communities can use school board meetings, parent-teacher associations assemblies, and teacher conferences to demand that data used to make schooling decisions be gathered in ways consistent with emancipatory approaches. Communities should also partner with community-based researchers and committed academics to commission evaluation and research in their own communities using emancipatory methods. The information learned from these community-driven studies can provide Black and Latinx communities with the

kind of knowledge that is informed by their worldview and takes seriously their needs, interests and concerns. Examples of emancipatory research include Coles (2021) work with Black high schoolers. The researcher partnered with Black youth to examine how antiblackness attempted to infect Black life and the Black high schoolers' resistance strategies. Warren and Coles' (2020) study of Black Education Spaces (BES) as resistance to antiblackness and insistence on the future of Black education as a site for healing and strategic resistance is another example of emancipatory research. A final example includes a study by Greenberg et al., (2021). This research team engaged in frequent dialogue with local Black community members to collaboratively study the impact of Covid-19 on student learning and wellness. Among other factors, the value of these studies lies in how each centers Black social realities (voices, ideas, experiences) in the purpose, design, and analysis of the research from a culturally-nurturing perspective, the tools used by researchers to collect and analyze data, and in how researchers designed the studies to talk about Black education and Black children beyond the Eurocentric perspective.

- 2. Reposition Black & Indigenous Education Knowledges.** Black people have persistently challenged racist ideas and actions through cultural ways of thinking, acting and teaching. During the 19th and 20th centuries, African Americans transformed teaching toward an approach that emphasized African American intellectual ability and the pursuit of education as one means toward the aims of personal, communal and group liberation. These freedom-minded ideas translated into pedagogical principles and approaches that shaped the interpersonal, instructional, and institutional landscape of African American education, and supported educational attainment and success for several generations of Black school children attending segregated African

American institutions (Acosta, 1997; Perry, 2003; Siddle Walker, 2000). African American approaches served to improve the condition of African Americans who were demoralized under the apartheid of Jim Crow and many African American educators enact these approaches today. While Black educators have a long history of excellence in education even prior to emancipation (Anderson, 1988), and often possess the knowledge and ability to lead in the pursuit of equitable education, many times they are silenced in their professional roles (Acosta, 2015; Delpit, 1988; Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2012; Siddle-Walker, 2012). Thus, to sincerely address the problem of Black student alienation, schools and school districts must listen to and learn from the wisdoms of practice embedded in African American pedagogical excellence (Acosta, Foster, & Houchen, 2019). Pedagogical, or teaching/schooling excellence demands the educational community to link teacher quality to the very human struggle for a self-defined existence and justice. It encapsulates the nature of teacher quality within a justice-oriented mission that positions teachers as essential agents of change, and it is this sociological connectedness that provides the foundation for effective teachers' enactment of instructional practices that promote student success (Acosta, 2015). Indeed, pedagogical excellence reaffirms the fact that there is no mystery to successfully teaching African American children and we need not consume ourselves with curriculum reform as if African American children require instruction and interaction outside of what all human children need to be successful (Hilliard, 2003). Black and Latinx communities can powerfully contribute to repositioning Black and Indigenous education knowledges by normalizing the framework of AAPE by leveraging the language of Black educational excellence in their advocacy for improvements in Black education and schooling. Black and Latinx people know what excellence in schooling for their children should look like, sound like and produce. Translating this knowledge into descriptions and concepts that reflect excellence in education, then sharing this

information throughout Black and Latinx communities can increase the solidarity and strength within and across communities, and can send a clear, consistent message to schools and school districts related to their expectations and hopes for a quality education.

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