

# Falling through the Cracks: Black Girls and Education

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The needs of Black girls are often overlooked by teachers, administrators, and policy makers. This oversight has contributed to a lack of educational programming and policies that address the impact of the intersection of racism and sexism on the educational experiences of Black girls, with some attention to the achievement gap. Policies simply focusing on race or gender ignore the unique positionality in which Black girls live and learn. Compounding this discussion is the recent focus on post-racialism in America. This article addresses this neglect, and suggests a framework to assist teachers and administrators in bridging this gap in educational programming and policies.

**Keywords:** Black girls, achievement gap, racism, sexism, post-racialism

**B**lack males and females are at risk for many types of school failure such as poor test scores, high dropout rates, achievement gap, low grades, high suspension rates, however, promises of educational reform are on the forefront. The federal government is increasing its focus in this area with initiatives such as *Race to the Top*, *My Brother's Keeper*, and a sweeping reform of *No Child Left Behind* (Koebler, 2012; The White House, 2014); and philanthropists are supporting educational initiatives (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012; Perez-Pena, 2010).

Although well-intentioned, oftentimes these initiatives ignore the complexity of systemic and interlocking forces at work in education, which can sometimes lead to a band-aid approach. Band-aid approaches neglect the individual and combined impact of variables such as race, racism, sexism, and gendered racism on educational experiences and outcomes of underrepresented groups. Compounding these issues is the national discourse on 'post-racialism' -- a concept that connotes an imagined era in which issues of race are no longer at the forefront of the national discourse. The term 'post-racialism' has been particularly pervasive since the election of President Obama (e.g., see [http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/no-such-place-as-post-racial-america/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/08/no-such-place-as-post-racial-america/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0)). By default, if our nation is post-racial, our educational system must be post-racial, which leads or misleads educators to believe and espouse that racial injustices do not exist in schools. Too much data reveal otherwise, especially when considering the achievement gap, which exists nationally, and in the majority of states and school districts. Black males and females continue to lag behind their White counterparts upon entering school – and the gap widens during the 13 years (Barton & Coley, 2009).

With approximately eight million Black students participating in the U.S. educational system (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), tracking educational attainment and progress has been noted as one measure of academic and social success. For determining progress and achievement in regard to student outcomes, dropout and graduation rates have been used as

markers However, the trends regarding these outcomes for Blacks continue to focus extensively on Black males. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), Black males experienced a major reduction in dropout rates (from 13% to 7%) between 1990 and 2011 in comparison to the 5% dropout rate for Whites and 14% drop out rates for Hispanics during the same time period. Admittedly, dropout rates are only one measure and they do not accurately capture or reflect the complexity of the challenges facing students of color. In addition, these statistics largely ignore the experiences, performance, and outcomes of Black girls.

Given that females of color will comprise approximately 53% of the U.S. population by the year 2050 (Center for American Progress, 2013), the idea of dismissing or leaving them out of a national discourse on education and asking them to subsume themselves under other group identities (by gender and/or race) is educationally unsound and inequitable. Yet, this is the situation in which Black girls currently and frequently find themselves. Although Black girls continue to experience marginalization, oppression, and ‘chilly’ classrooms, there is an obvious failure on the part of researchers to examine and conceptualize the integrated issues of race and gender (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Mirza, 2009; Pinder, 2008). Instead, when researchers examine marginalized groups in education, the focus is almost exclusively on Black males and White females, with little attention devoted to the unique experiences and needs of Black females. According to Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010):

... because feminist epistemologies tend to be concerned with the education of White girls and women, and race-based epistemologies tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively effecting Black boys, the educational needs of Black girls have fallen through the cracks (p. 12).

This, once again, relegates Black females to the margins, which begs the question—What about our Black girls? — Why are they falling through the cracks?

This paper argues that despite an active role in education, throughout multiple historical time periods, the unique (i.e., race and gender) needs of Black girls have been overlooked both theoretically and pragmatically. This oversight is complicated by the current political landscape, including views of post-racialism. With attention and focus on Black males and White females, there is the distinct potential for educators to provide a disservice to Black girls by ignoring their unique needs -- the intersection that their race and gender demands. Although Black girls have adopted coping and defense mechanisms to deal with gendered racism, these methods are often misinterpreted by teachers and school personnel as personality and/or cultural characteristics instead of responses to living with daily microaggressions (e.g., administrators, counselors, assessment personnel). This paper urges teachers, school personnel, and administrators to recognize and attend to the needs of this unique group, and engage Black girls through programming.

### **Historical Role of Black Women in Education**

*“I freed thousands of slaves. I could have freed thousands more, if they had known they were slaves.” -- Sojourner Truth*

Historically, education has been a recurring act of resistance across historical time periods for Blacks. In particular, the role of Black females in education, and as educators, is well documented (Bennett Jr, 1988; Camp, 2004; Franklin & Moss, 2011; Gaspar & Hine, 1996; Giddings, 1984; Harrison, 2009; Kolchin, 1993; Lerner, 1972; Morgan, 2004; Sterling, 1984; Takaki, 1993). Slaved/enslaved females recognized the importance of reading and writing and found ways to teach others what they learned. Sometimes, this information came in less organized gatherings, while other women went so far as to organize schools. Here is one example:

In Natchez, Louisiana, there were two schools taught by colored teachers. One of these was a slave woman who had taught at a midnight school for a year. It was opened at eleven or twelve o'clock at night, and closed at two o'clock a.m. . . . Milla Granson, the teacher, learned to read and write from the children of her indulgent master in her old Kentucky home. Her number of scholars was twelve at a time, and when she had taught them to read and write she dismissed them, and again took her apostolic number and brought them up to the extent of her ability, until she had graduated hundreds. A number of them wrote their own passes and started for Canada. (Lerner, 1973, pp. 32-33)

Milla is just one of example of how female slaves went to extraordinary life-threatening lengths to change their environments through education. Her simple yet terrifyingly brave act of educating slaves left an impact on hundreds of slaves.

While education was viewed then and now as a necessary act of freedom and liberation by Blacks, the concept was and is threatening for many Whites. Subsequently, many states created laws prohibiting the education of not just slaves but also free or freed Blacks. According to Anderson (1988), “between 1800 and 1835, most of the southern states enacted legislation making it a crime to teach enslaved children to read or write” (p. 2). Despite these laws, Blacks continued to seek educational opportunities as a way up and a way out of slavery through the Civil Rights movement.

At the start of the Civil Rights movement, the now infamous 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling overturned *Plessy vs. Ferguson's* separate but equal doctrine in American education. This was considered by many to be a major victory for Blacks in seeking equity and justice in the educational system. The ruling promised to repair or fix a faulty system of education and provide equal educational opportunities for all children. Sixty years since that landmark decision, Blacks, regardless of gender, age, educational level, and income level, find themselves continuing to fight the same battle—demanding educational equity and fighting for the rights of their children.

### **Post-Racial America?**

Complicating the fight for educational equity is the current political landscape. The election of our nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, has proven to be a catalyst for dialogue grounded in post-racialism. As a victory for African Americans in the United States, and a celebratory phenomenon for Blacks throughout the diaspora, Barack Obama's presidency could

be inadvertently complicating policy issues now facing Black students in the classroom. Alemán, Salazar, Rorrer, and Parker (2011) stated:

The historic nature of Barack Obama's election as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States is evident. However, the notion that the salience of race and racism, and the idea that we live in a so-called post-racial society solely because a person of color was elected to the office of the presidency, we believe, is naïve and shortsighted at best, and potentially detrimental to efforts that attempt to critically address the historical, structural, and institutional nature of inequity. (p. 480)

This is not to suggest that President Obama's election does not hold immense significance for the nation and world. For some, including African Americans, his election was a marker of a change in the social climate, including an end to the heated and complicated discourse on race. The symbolic nature of the election did not erase the realities of lived social experiences. However, viewing the election in symbolic terms is dangerous in part because of the potential of suspending policies that target inequities in education. According to Teasley and Ikard (2010), "many political proponents of post-racial thinking are agitating for the end to all race-and ethnicity-centered social policy mechanisms aimed at reducing social inequities" (p. 413).

Many definitions have been attributed to the term post-racialism. According to Bobo (2011), post-racialism:

in its simplest and least controversial form...is intended merely to signal a hopeful trajectory for events and social trends, not an accomplished fact of life. It is something toward which we as a nation still strive and remain guardedly hopeful about achieving (p. 13).

A more controversial and harmful view of post-racialism is more aligned with the well-rehearsed notions of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This definition posits that U.S. citizens, especially those in power and education, have moved beyond the racial divisions of the past.

The latter definition of post-racialism persists despite continued evidence of educational inequities, as well as issues of racism, classism, sexism, and gendered racism. This 'colorblind' approach is dangerous as it creates an environment of overt covertness—meaning the inequities may be visible to all who are willing to see them; yet, so subtle and sublime that one cannot easily point them out (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). As Ford (2010) maintains, colorblindness is an ideal that has yet to be achieved. Given the extent and magnitude of racism, colorblindness is an excuse and smoke screen used to detract from racial inequities in our schools, including gifted programs. Race, like gender, is a socio-demographic variable. Educators attend to gender, ensuring that neither males nor females are discriminated against in schools. Ford argues that we do the same with race so that race and racial differences via a cultural lens is not ignored or demonized.

The insidious nature of operating from a post-racial ideology is neglectful at best. For Whites who choose to operate from this ideology, it provides the opportunity to ignore White privilege, and instead place blame on marginalized groups for not attaining success in general, and success

comparable to Whites. The faulty logic of post-racialism, which negates White privilege, has been refuted by multiple scholars (e.g., Alemán et al., 2011; Cho, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2011); however, marginalized females and males continue to struggle with the charge of proving that the problem of racism still exists.

Although accurate and well-meaning, the concerns regarding post-racialism focuses on issues solely influencing race. Very little research and discussion exist issues of post-racialism as they intersect with gender. This creates the potential for further marginalizing, an already dangerously disenfranchised group—Black girls – who are falling through the cracks.

### **Falling Through the Cracks**

Whether or not issues of educational equity are viewed through the lens of post-racialism, it is important to note the role of gender in discussions of equity and education. Currently and understandably, the bulk of gendered-based research focuses on the experiences of Black boys or males in the educational system, however, their over-representation in special education and under-representation in gifted education cannot be ignored (Ford, 2010). At the same time, there is no sound rationale or need to ignore or discount the experiences of their female counterparts, hence the reason for this special issue.

While the social and educational crisis for Black males has reached historic levels and prompted the creation of programming specific to Black males (Holzman, 2012; *My Brother's Keeper*, 2014; Whiting, 2009, “Scholar Identity Model and Scholar Identity Institute”), this neglect or oversight of emphasis on Black girls is reminiscent of other historical events. For example, during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Black women were asked to privilege their identities and decide if they wished to support Black men in gaining their right to vote. Their gender was all but disregarded. Further, during the women’s movement, Black women were asked, expected, and perhaps even required to suppress the unique role their race or blackness played in the way they experienced, viewed, and understood the world. Both of the stances are unacceptable because they ignore the impact of intersectionality of oppression (Crenshaw, 1995) and the matrix of domination (Hill Collins, 1990). In addition, by asking Black girls to privilege their race or gender identities, rather than embracing both, we deny them the opportunity to embrace their ‘multiplicities of self’ (Lorde, 2007).

### **Roles Black Girls Play**

Asking Black girls to privilege their identities places them at risk for falling through the cracks. In conditions that have repeatedly told girls, indirectly or directly, that they do not matter, it is important to develop survival, coping, and defensive skills. One of the ways Black girls have learned to survive in school is by adopting a “race-less” persona, which is “... the absence of behavioral and attitudinal characteristics related to a particular race” (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010, p. 12; Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In essence, if Black girls deny who they are and adopt the characteristics of the majority culture, they can be successful as Black girls in education. This logic is problematic in that it teaches Black girls that in order to be successful, they cannot be who they are organically. Moreover, it challenges and influences academic success, as it is challenging and difficult to excel in environments that fail to value every aspect

of one's identity or identities (Rollock, 2007). Hence, additional theory, conceptual models, and research have shown that resiliency, racialized identity, and a social justice disposition may also be necessary for Black girls to be successful in education (Evans-Winters, 2005; Ford, 2010; Fordham, 1998; O'Connor, 1997). While these methods may help Black females survive the educational system, they do so by asking such females to alter parts of themselves.

One way Black girls have learned to alter themselves is by learning to become invisible—to be seen but not heard, as in keeping with Ellison (1952). Educational research supports the notion of invisibility for Black girls (Henry, 1998; Mirza, 2009), while Apple (1999) discusses the way issues of race are minimized when examining educating policies and standards. To push back the margins, many Black females have found ways to increase their visibility, including adopting such labels and stereotypes as being angry, aggressive, promiscuous, and/or loud (Koonce, 2012; Evans-Winters, 2005). Black girls are also punished for refusing to be discounted and demonized, and run the risk of being stereotyped and dehumanized, while simply fighting to be heard and validated. They rail against being allowed to participate, but not fully included.

### **Goodness of Fit: Where Do Black Girls Fit?**

Marginalization, the social process of being made or becoming marginalized (relegated to the fringes, made to seem unimportant, pushed out of or not accepted in the mainstream) (hooks, 1990) is defined by hooks as the outer edges in which Black females and women live as “part of the whole but outside the main body” (p. 149). The question becomes: Where do Black girls fit within a society that has historically marginalized them based on race *and* based on gender? This challenge is complicated by the minimal research conducted on or about Black females. In general, most theories are framed from a White male perspective and most theories pertaining to females are framed for White females, vis a vis feminism. Both have forced Black women to speak for themselves and each other regarding the importance of a more inclusive theoretical framework. One of the seminal works relating to this issue is Hill Collins' (1990) *Black Feminist Thought*. The ideology of this work has helped Black females recognize that their ways of knowing and being in the world were and are indeed valid. Hill Collins discusses the importance of recognizing the validity in Black feminist epistemology, and reminds us that historically Black females have participated in shared histories and stories that bear repeating. These stories allow Black females to view themselves through a non-deficit lens; thus, we learn to embrace a style of learning, living, and being that we have been continually told is not valid.

In contrast and in response to this societal invisibility, several noted Black feminist scholars such as those mentioned earlier began the discussion of empowering Black girls and women (e.g., Lorde, hooks, Walker, Hill Collins). Yet, relatively few Black female scholars have emerged with new theoretical frameworks to carry the torch. To be responsive to the unique needs of Black girls, we must address the historical oppression and marginalization of Black females through an emancipatory theoretical orientation—one which recognizes that Black females of all ages have shared experiences navigating the world, from slavery to the present.

### **Mentorship and Other Strategies**

Raising awareness of the biases of the educative process is a priority in any attempt to stop Black girls from falling through the cracks. While there are multiple noted coping methods for Black

women, faith, social support, body ownership, and unique defense mechanisms (Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 1995; Howard-Vital, 1989; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998; Terhune, 2007; Wilson, 2009), there is less research on how Black girls cope and what educators can do to assist them in navigating the institution of education. One method that may be useful in addressing the needs of Black girls is mentorship.

Mentorship disrupts the narrative many Black females may be internalizing, and instead provides them access to the wisdom, experiences, and survival skills of their elders. Mentorship programs allow Black females to understand and validate their common experiences, and thereby further understand their shared viewpoint.

Ford's (2013) Female Achievement Model of Excellence (F<sup>2</sup>AME) is an example of one model for working with Black females. It builds upon the Scholarly Identity Model of Whiting (Whiting, 2009), which is designed to address underachievement among Black males. The F<sup>2</sup>AME model has as its goal increasing the resiliency, self-efficacy, racial and gender pride, which is accomplished by increasing awareness in four areas of Black girls' emotional and academic needs: (1) intrinsic motivation and work ethic, (2) internal locus of control, (3) willingness to make sacrifices, and (4) academic pride. The ability or skills of Black girls to successfully address these areas will increase their potential for academic and social-emotional success.

Another useful approach could be the CARE (Connection, Awareness, Retraining, and Encouragement) model (Ricks, 2014). The CARE model emphasizes the importance of an integrated and holistic approach to working with Black girls in education. This model is comprised of four areas (connection, awareness, programming, and encouragement) that work together to protect Black girls from falling through the cracks. Protecting Black girls in educational settings demands an increased awareness level and a willingness among professionals to enact meaningful changes at both individual *and* systemic levels. The components of the CARE model include:

- **Connection:** Administrators and teachers need to work at improving their connection with their Black female students. Developing connections with all students is important. Developing connections with students from marginalized groups is vital. These are often the most difficult connections to initiate, as there may be multiple cultural barriers. These connections will play a large role in the experiences students from marginalized groups have in class. Oftentimes connections are hampered by miscommunication and/or preconceived images held by either party. Yet, without this basic connection, the academic growth of a group of students can be thwarted.
- **Awareness:** In order to work towards connecting and creating environments in which Black girls can thrive; educational administrators, teachers and families need to increase their awareness of the unique issues Black girls face. This must be done at both institutional and individual levels. Opportunities for professional development, teacher training, and collaboration among parents and educational administrators should be provided by educational institutions. Qualified professionals (preferably consultants) should be available to begin the dialogue and help demystify the issues surrounding Black girls. In addition, these trainings should not be presented from a deficit lens.

- **Retraining:** Raising awareness is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. Staff, administrators, and teachers must engage in programs that will assist them in retraining the way they interact with and view Black girls. Retraining should consist of programs aimed at increasing and encouraging Black girls to succeed in education. This type of programming should also be available parents to encourage a wraparound approach to care. Lastly, programming aimed at helping students retrain their understanding of their environments, their peers, and their reactions would complete the circle.
- **Encouragement:** Every student could benefit from increased encouragement and mentorship. For Black girls, this key component could help them learn behaviors and techniques useful for navigating the institution of education. Structured encouragement in terms of mentorship opportunities is a key component of this area. Mentorship will help not only the mentee, but the experience would also provide a wealth of information for the mentor. Both peer mentorship and adult/child mentorship opportunities should be provided. Mentors should be well vetted prior to engaging with students. Alternative forms of mentorship (using technology for example), should be considered as viable options.

Integrating strategies such as mentorship using F<sup>2</sup>AME and CARE can only enhance the experience of Black girls in education. The most vital component is to ensure that resources are to implement these strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Education has played an important and historic role for Black people in the United States. Particularly active in education have been Black women who have acted as teachers, administrators, and students throughout the decades. Despite this active and visible role, Black women (and now Black girls) have not been placed at the forefront of educational policy discussions. Instead, these discussions continue to ignore the intersectionality of oppression, and instead focus on programming that is tailor made per group. This is problematic, as none of this programming acknowledges gendered racism. Complicating this issue is the current narrative of post-racialism in the nation. This narrative suggests that there is no longer a need to discuss issues of race in America.

These oversights add to the invisibility of Black females and continue to support narratives of resistance and/or acting out. To support Black females and ensure their academic success, programs and initiatives that address the gendered racism present in educational settings will have to be created. These initiatives must look at both individual and systemic solutions. Mentoring programs and models, such as Ford's F<sup>2</sup>AME model, are excellent examples of programming and initiatives that disrupt the narrative. Instead of labeling, ignoring and overlooking Black females, it is imperative the schools address the unique needs of this population.

### **AUTHOR NOTES**

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