

Differences in School Spaces for Black Children

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Schools have become very difficult spaces for black children to navigate during adolescence. School spaces incubate defined gender roles for students and rob them from the opportunity to flow through different identities. Race is an active categorizer for students in school spaces as well. Ferguson (2000) described school as a “workplace for children” and linked getting in trouble to “working hard or refusing to work” (p.165). The culture of this space lends itself to white hegemonic masculinity as defined by McCready (2009) and Pascoe (2007). “Hegemonic masculinity, the type of gender practice that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality, is at the top of this hierarchy” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 7) McCready (2009) defines hegemonic masculinity as dominance over multiple others and emphasized hegemonic masculinity as whiteness (p.136). The whiteness of hegemonic masculinity dominates school spaces and negatively influences the learning environment for black children. McCready (2009) also explores the concept of progressive black masculinity and its effects on students of color. I hope to illuminate the various difficulties for black boys and girls in school spaces and explore strategies of how black children are making these spaces more inclusive.

Teachers mark black boys as troublemakers. According to Ferguson (2000), they have difficulty conforming to the structure of the school environment of doing work. Trouble makers are conscious of the fact that school adults have labeled them as problems, social and educational misfits; that what they bring from home and neighborhood – family structure and history, forms of verbal and nonverbal

expression, neighborhood lore and experience – has little or even deficit value.

(Ferguson, 2000, p. 169)

Troublemakers, specifically black boys, are constantly ostracized in school spaces and their culture expression is deemed as deviant behavior. They are not allowed to accept aspects of their identity and their culture has a negative stigma in school spaces. This cultural construct of viewing blackness through a negative lens becomes meaningful to students and teachers through reinforcement in daily routines. Within this context, troublemakers are necessary in maintaining a healthy routine of learning for white hegemonic masculinity by disrupting the routine. For teachers, the day goes faster and some students use this opportunity to gain respect (Ferguson, 2000, p. 169). The issue with this reinforcement is black boys are at risk for receiving detrimental punishment for this behavior. Ferguson further expands on the perception of black boys by authority figures in these settings,

Black males are already seen as embodying the violence and aggression that will drive away “desirable” families and their children. Fighting on the part of black boys is more visible as a problem, so it is viewed with extreme concern and responded to more swiftly and harshly. (Ferguson, 2000, p. 194)

Black boys are policed in schools by administration and teachers who are readily available to discipline behaviors. They are targeted and not comforted.

Pascoe (2007) opens her ethnography with a scene from a school skit in which, “the gangstas symbolize hypersexuality and invoke a thinly veiled imagery of black rapist (A. Davis 1981), who threatens white men control over white women.” (Pascoe, 2007, p.

4) These images of black boys are caricatured in schools through the lens of hip-hop culture and the hypersexuality of black males is reinforced in how they are punished. Hip-hop culture is anti-white hegemonic masculinity and is a threat to white dominance over others. Unfortunately, this heightens the view of black boys and violence in school spaces. Hip-Hop is deemed an aggressive genre of music that presents black men as violent, threatening, and animalistic. These stereotypes are perpetuated in the media.

Black girls are also presented as problematic in school spaces. They fight in school spaces and experience hegemonic masculinity as a result of their perception. According to Ferguson (2000) they got into fights “easier because they got more attitude” (p. 180). In addition, Cox (2015) mentioned that black girls are also seen as “deviant” and are constantly combating the black female sexuality figure of the “Jezebel”. (p. 159) This view of black female sexuality results in the constant policing of black girl bodies in school spaces. “Black girls can be fast or promiscuous, but their youth or minor status requires that the state be accountable for their behavior to some degree, which usually translates to the surveillance and disciplining of their bodies and sexual expression” (Cox, 2015, p. 160). Ferguson (2000) provides us with another perspective:

To be female is to be powerless, victimized, chased down the hallway, an object to be acted upon with force, whose hand can be seized and placed between male legs. To be female is also to be sexually passive, coy, the “chaste” rather than the chaser, in relation to male sexual aggressiveness. (p.174)

Black girls are not allowed to be sexually expressive without facing these consequences. These biases held by teachers, students, and friends make this type of racialized gender

expression difficult for black girls. In contrast, white males in school spaces are celebrated for using their male dominance over female bodies and champion the term, “male whore” while promiscuous girls are slut shamed (Pascoe, 2007, p. 91). Black boys are not celebrated for this type of gender expression, but are feared and victimized for perpetuating aspects of hip-hop culture. These differences cross racial lines, but are heavily ingrained in school culture.

School spaces reinforce gender and racial gaps. Teachers who superimpose the idea that females excel in many areas and males are limited to sports magnify differences between boys and girls. Eliot (2010) refers to these differences in her article, “Boys hear that girls can do anything whereas the boys get boxed into smaller corners by their presumed limitations (Boys are less verbal); teachers’ prohibitions (“No running”); and peers narrow views of masculinity (“Art is gay”).” (Eliot, 2010, p. 35) These gender differences are heightened once they intersect racial lines for black boys and girls. Not only are black boys less verbal, they are perceived as violent and hypersexual. Black girls may excel in areas more than black boys, however they will never break the stigma of the “Jezebel”. School spaces construct identities of children and socialize them to fit into the status quo. Pascoe elaborates on this in stating,

At the level of the institution, schools are a primary institution for identity formation, development, and solidification for American youth. Social groups in schools such as cliques, provide one of the ways that youth begin to identify and position themselves by social class, gender, and race. (Pascoe, 2007, p. 18)

Gender performances in school spaces are heavily influenced by race. These racial gendered performances are very specific behaviors for black boys. “For African-American boys, the performance of masculinity invoked cultural conventions of speech performance that draws on a black repertoire. Verbal performance is an important medium for black males to establish a reputation, make a name for yourself, and achieve status.” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 178-179) This type of verbal performance often leads to black boys getting into trouble compared to their white counterpart. This gender performance is very different for black girls.

Girls are denied the right of dramatic public displayed. The behavior is not taken seriously; it is rated as “sassy” rather than symptomatic of a more dangerous disorder. In some classrooms, in fact, risk taking and “feistiness” on the part of girls is subtly encouraged given the prevailing belief that what they need is to become more visible, more assertive in the classroom. (Ferguson, 2000, p. 180) These performance disruptions in classroom spaces are expressions of masculinity and femininity that are not acknowledged positively by teachers. These differences magnify the fact that both black boys and girls are frequently outcast in school spaces. Lastly, they lead to the oppression of others in school spaces.

Black students find other ways to establish a sense of belonging and community in these school spaces. “When black students used kinship terms such as “brother” or “sister” to refer to one another it conveyed a sense of peoplehood or collective social identity. (McCready, 2009, p.129) This system of belonging takes on a different meaning when critically looking at it through a gendered, sexual, and cultural lens. This “fictive

kinship” as McCready (2009) describes, can be a response to several forms of oppression specifically for students who are female, gay, and/or gender non-conforming.

Black students who are gay and/or gender nonconforming are often overlooked, silenced, abused, or excluded in school spaces. Because these students intersect multiple identities and maneuver through gender roles, they do not fit the heteronormative scripts of school spaces. McCready (2009) highlights that gender nonconformity causes a lot of marginalization and abuse. In addition, same-sex desire triggers other forms of oppression in schools. (McCready, 2009, p. 134)

These differences created in school spaces make learning a problematic for black boys. With varying biases and perceptions those teachers have about their black boys, many students struggle to discover and/or redefine their identity. “Black males fall into a “Dionysian trap” fashions, mainstays of U.S mainstream culture that feed their pride and self-esteem, but cannot see beyond these icons when “it is time to turn off Fifty Cent and get out the SAT prep book.” (McCready, 2009, p. 128) Hip-hop culture is heteronormative and it does not allow black boys the freedom to explore gender and sexuality. Many black queer boys are forced to learn through a different process than their heterosexual peers. Dominant curriculum is homophobic and does not allow queer students the freedom to navigate through varying identities.

Munoz (1999) asserts that queers of color still must reckon with dominant ideologies on racial and sexual differences as they negotiate their identities and politics vis-à-vis cultural texts and performances. Through a process he calls *disidentification*, Munoz contends that queers of color learn to concurrently

identify with and rework dominant ideologies as they engage in acts of knowledge production. (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 33)

The integration of hip-hop culture into school spaces is also seen in Pascoe's ethnography and can help in understanding other uses for black girls in schools. "They spat, walked in a imping "gangsta" style, wore boys' clothing, ditched lass, and listened to loud hip-hop music, dancing and purposefully singing only the "naughty" lyrics." (Pascoe, 2007, p. 120) In this excerpt, the basketball girls are using hip-hop culture to assert their masculinity. In this sense, the cultural trappings of hip-hop for black boys are now re-interpreted by black girls as a means of empowerment and identity.

"While hip-hop culture is often derided for its rampant misogyny, girls and women find ways to appropriate the culture and style in order to express independence and agency." (Pascoe, 2007, p. 121)

Furthermore, the use of hip-hop as a cultural agent, led the basketball girls to gender maneuver through masculine and feminine behaviors.

Gender maneuvering refers to the way groups act to manipulate the relations between masculinity and femininity as others commonly understand them. By engaging in public practices that students associated with masculinity (certain clothing styles, certain sexual practices, and interactional dominance), these girls called into question the easy association of masculinity with male bodies."

(Pascoe, 2007, p. 116)

The process of gender maneuvering and aide black men in moving towards a progressive masculinity. Just as the basketball girls, Pascoe's (2007) ethnography

positioned in and out of gender roles, so can black men. “Relinquishing privilege and personal accountability, progressive black masculinities recognize and subsequently relinquish real and imagined privileges gained through domination, “in particular, the benefits and costs attached to sexism and heterosexism” (McCready, 2009, p. 137).

Progressive masculinity is gender fluidity. It is acknowledgment of gender as a social construct and the release of the power attached allowing for free gender expression.

McCready acknowledges the difficulty of achieving the release of male domination and transitioning into progressive black masculinity if there is no support from teachers, students, and family members.

The support of teachers within school spaces is crucial to the success of students of color when fighting against heteronormative culture. There is a cyclical narrative of victimization that currently plagues classrooms and school spaces about black students. Brockenbrough (2015) mentions that we must go beyond the victimization narrative in our research and understanding of queer students of color (p. 34). This concept is applicable in working with all students of color. Black progressive masculinity is a concrete example of moving beyond the narrative of victimization. However, students who engage in these behaviors receive little to no support from family members and teachers in school spaces (McCready, 2009, p. 138). Gender nonconforming students need more support and affirmation from their teachers for the risk they take in expressing themselves. Since there is a current lack of knowledge production in the classroom about gay men, it is very difficult for black male students to understand, support, and conceptualize black progressive masculinity (McCready, 2009, p. 139). Even within the

context of single-sex schools, Noguera (2012) mentions the benefits of having the support of teachers and families when working with students of color,

However, schools that are successful with black and Latino boys show us that educators can counter and even overcome these obstacles when they work closely with parents and community to design positive teaching environments that meet the needs of the children they serve. (Noguera, 2012)

However, we must not stop there. The single-sex school model for black and brown boys has many flaws as well. If we hope to present all aspects of black masculinities to black boys, we must “repave the road home, widening it” so all boys can participate. Teachers must address subjects such as homophobia, gender nonconformity, sexual identity, and heterosexism in these spaces. (McCready, 2009, p. 145)

Teachers need to be advocates for queer students. There is a direct correlation between sexuality, gender, and power for queer students and students of color in school spaces. As mentioned earlier, many of our school spaces are white male hegemonic dominant. Many school rituals are heterosexual and silence queer students. Teachers can disrupt many of these rituals by integrating a queer presence or critique in their classrooms.

The significance of sexuality within a QOC critique demands a concerted effort to address the deafening silence in educational research on the sexual identities of queers of color. This silence is not surprising, because homophobic cultural discourses have cast queer sex as a threat to children (Rofes, 2005), thus

pressuring schools to homophobically exclude queer sex from anti homophobic educational initiatives. (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 36)

Both queer students and students of color are outcast in school spaces. Support from teachers in understanding the social, cultural, racial, gendered, and historical implications for their ostracism can help disrupt the current barriers in school spaces. Teacher support of queer students goes beyond “coming out”. Although we can applaud those teachers for supporting students who come out, we must understand that some students may never come out due to racial and social implications. Furthermore, these students may need more support and understand from teachers as they flow through varying degrees of queer visibility.

By bringing race, class, and culture to bear on the politics of queer visibility, a QOC critique casts insightful doubts on the liberatory effects of coming out for non-white subjects. In the process, performing degrees of queer *invisibility* – where queerness may be completely hidden or, if visible is not openly acknowledged – emerges as an agentic practice for queers of color who prioritize connectedness with families and racial communities over coming out.

(Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 37)

This invisibility and visibility are emotions that students of color experience when they “get in trouble”. Black children no matter their sexuality, gender, or social class need support and acknowledgement from teachers. If the only acknowledgement they receive is when they get in trouble, we are doing our black children a disservice. The support of

our school and family communities can change the current trend of school spaces
creating differences for black children.

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