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Black Female Students: Issues and Considerations for Teachers of Teachers

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Introduction

Research on the educational experiences of Black girls reveals information too long ignored about this population. An analysis of their experiences as set forth in several studies raises critical questions about their status as students and about their psycho-social, and intellectual development in desegregated classrooms. The conclusions indicate that Black females may be at risk in many of the classrooms in America.

These findings not only have implications about the educational development of Black female students, but also have broader implications for educators who are preparing teacher candidates for the public schools. Two significant relationships emerge: (1) the impact that race and gender have on the way Black females are regarded in classrooms and (2) the relationship between teacher expectation and the academic achievement of Black female students. Additionally, it is revealing that few recommendations are offered to educators for the enhancement of the educational well-being of Black females. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a research base and strategies for teachers of teachers to enhance the learning experience of Black female students.

Influences on Black Females

To understand Black females better, it is important to understand their early social and cultural experiences. It should be noted that Black families are not monolithic: differences in socio-economic status, school, and peer influences exist (Staples, 1971; TenHouten, 1970).

The family is the primary socializing agent for Black females and the function of the mother is very important

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within it. She transfers cultural values and usually maintains the general well-being of family members. It is within the context of the family and the community that the basic attitudes of young Black children are formulated. Unfortunately, many problems arise when White norms are imposed upon cultural and family configurations. This reality is critical in comprehending the role of the Black family, particularly in the socializing of Black females.

Using experimental data and observation, researchers noted several differences in the role of Black females (Harrison, 1977; Ladner, 1971). For example, many Black females, especially eldest daughters learn that "mothering or caretaking" is highly regarded within their culture. Further, as females mature, this function does not diminish, but becomes even greater as expectations of independent functioning within the home prevail.

Another feature that distinguishes Black and White families originates in child-rearing practices. Baumrind (1972, 1978) found that Black families were described by White norms as more authoritarian than White families. Reid (1982) observes that the sex-role socialization within the Black community appeared to be more highly valued than it is within the White community.

The status of women within the family structure is often different for Black families than for White families. Generally speaking, Black children learn at an early age to accept a concept of women occupying a prominent role in the family. It is advocated that this socialization process may contribute to the egalitarian attitude often exhibited by Black girls in school settings. Another is that Black girls tend to reconcile the role of mother and worker as an integral part of their lives very early (Allen, 1978; Billingsley, 1968).

The experiences of many young Black females suggests that Black women are expected to work to help sustain the economic well-being of Black families. Consequently, they are socialized differently about working outside of the home. It is observed in many of the available studies on occupational or career choices that Black females were more likely to choose traditional career paths and demonstrate more traditional female-dominated values than their White female counterparts (Gump, 1978; Gurin and Gaylord, 1976 and Murray, 1985). These factors support that Black women are more likely to hold positions of lowest occupational status and salaries (Wallace, Datcher, and Malveaux, 1980). This reality becomes very meaningful to the socialization of Black females regarding the world of work.

Desegregated Learning Environments and Black Females

Besides the family, the school has a significant influence on the psycho-social and intellectual development of students. Classrooms, in many respects, are a microcosm of the nation. The classroom setting, in addition to imparting knowledge and skills to children, creates an arena where they learn first-hand about race relations and become more cognizant about role expectations based on gender. What seems more significant is that children begin to determine their individual roles within the larger society based on classroom interactions among themselves, their peers and teachers.

Many advocates of desegregation expected desegregated classrooms to accomplish several goals: namely, to improve racial attitudes and to increase the academic achievement levels of children, especially Black children. The conflicting findings of the research on various aspects of desegregation and their impact on the educational development of Black children raise interesting questions

(Carithers, 1970; Irvine and Irvine, 1983; Rist, 1979; St. John and Lewis, 1975; Teele and Mayo, 1969; Washington, 1980; and Weinberg, 1983) In the extensive review of the literature on desegregation, Carithers (1970) reported that Black girls were the most adversely affected from desegregation efforts. A closer analysis of the effects of desegregated classrooms on the status of Black female students suggests that, as a group, they may be more at risk than any other student population.

Research supports that no single variable, but many, affect the growth and development of children. However, the most obvious deterrent to the enhancement of children's growth and development is stereotyping. Stereotyping thwarts the psycho-social and intellectual enhancement of young people. Some studies report Black children are stereotyped as aggressive, hostile, and unintelligent (Brophy and Good, 1974; Coates, 1972; Rubovits and Maehr, 1973). If children behave in a manner that is different from the stereotypical pattern, they may not be positively reinforced by teachers in the classroom (Davidson, 1981; Grant, 1984).

Black female students appear to be at a distinct disadvantage because they encounter both gender and race stereotyping. Black female students oftentimes do not display passive or submissive behaviors, traits that may be influenced by family and cultural experiences. Another area that contributes to stereotyping of Black female students is physical appearance. Black females do not represent "White standards of beauty." In fact, they possess fewer of the valued attributes of society (Harrison, 1974). Studies of Black females consistently report that they often occupy marginal and disadvantaged status among their peers and their teachers (Grant, 1984; Woolridge and Richman, 1985).

Criswell (1937) conducted research on a Northern school with 75 percent Black population and reported greater cleavage occurred between the sexes than the races. The results were more pronounced from the fifth grade through the beginning of adolescence. However, during this same period, all males appeared better able to develop and sustain affinity with each other, regardless of race, even if they struggled to establish more prestige in their relations among groups.

Campbell and Yarrow (1958) studied desegregation efforts in summer camps and pointed out that desegregation holds the greatest initial hazards for young Black females. They experienced more feelings of self-rejection as they recognized the favored social and power positions of the White females. The authors noted that desegregated settings provided fewer opportunities for Black females to be viewed positively than they did for either White students or Black males.

Singer (1967) studied children in the fifth grade and identified distinct sex differences in ethnic attitudes. White females in desegregated schools were more willing to associate with Blacks. Black females, on the other hand, in both desegregated and integrated schools were the least willing to associate with Whites. Black males in desegregated schools were more willing to associate with Whites than those in segregated settings.

In another study of race and its effect on the social structure in the classrooms, St. John and Lewis (1975) noted the special difficulty encountered by Black females in bi-racial situations. The authors observed that Black female students lacked the peer status or athletic abilities associated with their male counterparts. Consequently, there were no opportunities for them to demonstrate competencies that were meaningful among their peers.

Sager and Schofield (1980) in their study of student interactions in desegregated schools indicated that students

in desegregated schools preferred to socialize along gender lines more often than along interracial lines. (These findings are corroborated by DeVries and Edwards, 1977; Schofield, 1982; Wiley and Eskilson, 1978).

Generally speaking, the results of these studies demonstrate that interracial associations appear to be more difficult for Black females than Black males. They also show that Black females hold a precarious social status among males, not shared by other females. A significant implication of the findings was that desegregated environments may be hostile to the intellectual and psycho-social development of Black females (Crain, Marhard and Narot, 1982).

Several conclusions regarding the growth and development of Black females emerge in order for them to persist in this kind of environment. First, Black females learn early that they must look to themselves for their success in society, just as their mothers do now, and just as their ancestors did during slavery. Second, those Black females who persist develop the necessary attendant coping strategies to withstand the impact of negative influences in the school environment. Finally, for educators, the results support the notion that the positive educational experiences of many Black female students, more often than not, came by *chance* rather than *equal opportunity*.

Teacher Relationships with Black Females

Many factors such as the classroom setting, the quality of instructional materials and learning activities, and the racial configuration among students impinge on the interactive and behavioral patterns of children in school. The role of the teacher is significant in this process. Through planned educational activities and interpersonal interactions with children, teachers convey their attitudes about students as learners and as individuals (Davidson and Lang, 1960). More importantly, it is in this way that teachers are capable of transferring either positive or negative behaviors and attitudes toward children (Leacock, 1968).

Research substantiates that teachers' perceptions and attitudes about students are influenced by socio-economic status, gender, race, and academic achievement. More succinctly, middle-class White children who earn "good" grades are the most preferred among teachers. Although Black children may have similar academic status, they were less preferred. Students who do not meet those standards were the least preferred (Pollard, 1979; St. John and Lewis, 1975; Woolridge and Richman, 1985).

Researchers have examined various aspects of *teacher role* and concluded that teacher expectation significantly influences student performance (Baron, Tom, and Cooper, 1985; Brophy and Good, 1970; Finn, 1972; Lightfoot, 1976; Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968). Additional studies of teacher expectancy reveal that race also influences teacher attitudes about the academic competence of children. Further data suggest that teacher expectation also influences student performance along gender lines (DeBord, Griffin and Clark, 1977; Frazier and Sadker, 1973).

Much of the research on these issues tends to focus on either the single effect of race or gender with minimal attention devoted to analyzing the effect of both gender-race on education. Research that explores the gender-race effect contains significant findings about the academic achievement of Black female students.

Teacher Perceptions and Academic Achievement

This portion of the paper will examine two aspects of the teacher function: teacher perceptions and academic achievement and the effect of both on Black females.

The perceptions teachers hold are very important to the growth and development of children in academic and non-academic areas. If children are perceived positively, then they are more likely to behave and achieve academically. Conversely, if children are perceived negatively, then the unlikelihood of their achieving is increased. Children know the way teachers feel about them, and they often respond accordingly (Davidson and Lang, 1960). If children are perceived positively then their intellectual and psychosocial development is more likely to be enhanced (Bank, Biddle, and Good, 1980; Rist, 1970).

Results of studies on gender differentiation are often contradictory. Some report that males received more negative responses than females (Etaugh and Harlow, 1975), and others report that females receive more teacher contact and praise than males (Dwyer, 1972). However, more recent studies on gender differentiation in the classroom report that White females are the most preferred students in the classroom (Washington, 1980). These findings become meaningful when the race-gender factor is incorporated in the way teachers view Black female students.

Washington (1982), in analyzing the attitudes and behaviors of Black and White teachers toward students, reported that both Black and White teachers had more biased attitudes toward Black students than toward White students. In fact, the study showed that Black teachers viewed Black female students more critically; White teachers viewed White male students more critically. White female students were rated more positively than any other student group in the study. Similar findings were corroborated by other researchers (Grant, 1984; Teahan, 1974).

Byalick and Bersoff (1974) investigated the effects of race and gender reinforcement patterns of teachers. Their findings revealed something "akin to reverse prejudice" (p. 479). The teachers of both races reinforced males of the opposite-race more frequently than other student groups. The next group most reinforced was males of the same race. However, Black female students were the least positively reinforced of all student groups, especially in classes taught by Black female teachers.

There appeared to be no substantive reasons for the findings regarding Black female teachers' attitudes toward Black girls. At least two theories were advocated. Perhaps, Black female teachers set high standards for Black female students and assessed that they were not striving to attain those standards. Or perhaps the prevalence of *teacher establishment theory* prevailed—it predicts that White girls would receive more positive reinforcement because they are most similar to the teacher establishment (White female teachers). It was suggested that Black teachers adhered more to *teacher establishment status values* as did their White female counterparts in their assessment of Black female students (Washington, 1982).

Teahan (1974) studied the effects of gender and expectations of success among Black students in lower and higher socioeconomic school environments. He concluded that peer influence had a considerable impact on academic achievement of students. The peer relationships influenced who attended college as well as who selected certain occupational or career choices. The significance was higher among the males than for females. Gender bias in some career choices prevailed, namely in the sciences, mathematics and some of the professions. The author noted that the most important conclusion of the study was that, regardless of socioeconomic status, the condition for Black females was the worst in any school.

Gibbs (1985) reported the preliminary findings of a comparative study on the self-esteem and educational-vo-

catational aspirations of Black and White adolescent females. Three hundred eighty-seven female completed self-report inventories in the San Francisco area public schools. The results identified several points: (1) Black females were as well-adjusted as their White peers in terms of self-esteem and adolescent adjustment, (2) Black females were psychologically healthy and possessed high educational aspirations and expectations.

Perceptions of Black Females

Many of the psycho-social perceptions associated with female students identify them as displaying less overt physical aggressiveness, being more sensitive to pain, being neat and compliant, and being more intuitive. Generally, males are perceived as more aggressive, displaying less sensitivity to pain, and possessing more analytical or objective abilities (Bardwick and Douvan, 1971).

Differentiations based on gender become more notable in the development of certain cognitive skill areas. From kindergarten through grade four, females usually outperform males (Bentzen, 1963). A shift in development usually occurs with the onset of adolescence; then attitudes toward academic achievement, vocational interests, and success are in relation to gender, particularly for females. Certain subjects: mathematics, science, or courses requiring spatial reasoning areas were seen as more appropriate for males than for females. These distinctions become important considerations for females as they make career and educational choices.

Grant (1984) recorded ethnographic observations and teacher interviews in desegregated first grade classrooms to determine the attitudes of teachers toward Black female first graders. The results showed that as students, Black females were reinforced by teachers to enhance their social skills more often than their academic skills. They received more feedback for non-academic rather than academic work. Black female students were used as the *rule-enforcer* for teachers more than any of the other students. In fact, the study suggests that Black females' socialization in classrooms was analogous to the status played by Black women in the larger society. Other studies by (Scott-Jones and Clark, 1986; Washington, 1980, 1982) identified similar results.

Additionally, several studies of teacher attitudes in secondary schools also report similar findings. Timberlake (1981) studied a group of high school Black females identified as *high risk* students and found that those defined as *persisters* generally had a more positive attitude about schooling than non-persisters. The more positive attitudes are attributable to the consideration and concern teachers demonstrate. On the other hand, the lack of concern or consideration by teachers was identified as a major factor among non-persistence.

Another study in secondary schools that focused on such characteristics as racial composition and curricular emphasis, indicates that these features may negatively impact the educational experiences of Black females. Chester (1980) studied two types of high schools and found that Black females expressed lower aspirations and less relevant vocational interests in a liberal arts school than those Black females enrolled in a vocational school. One cause of the discrepancy in performance seemed tied to both gender and race distinctions. For example, in secondary schools where the *climate* was unfavorable to Blacks, the academic performance of Black females was reduced. Black males attending these schools were not as adversely affected (Crain, Mahard and Narot, 1982).

Another significant factor in the academic achieve-

ment and intellectual development of Black female students was influenced by the racial overtone of the learning environment. Studies of desegregated classrooms indicated that Black females felt more socially isolated than either their Black or White peers. While academic achievement among Black students is lower than among White students in similar class settings, several researchers (Crain and Mahard, 1978; Hare, 1979) reported that Black females exhibited higher academic and intellectual achievement than their Black male counterparts. They also demonstrated more persistence and follow through in setting goals. However, they were not positively reinforced by teachers (Baughman and Dahlstrom, 1968).

Racial attitudes held by teachers and peers were significant factors in the psycho-social and academic development of students. Researchers found that Black female students possessed highly developed interpersonal skills in their interactions with both Black and White peers and teachers (Crain and Mahard, 1978; Grant, 1984; Reid, 1982). Black females were less likely than either their White or Black peers to be intimidated by verbal or physical aggression.

Sager and Schofield (1980) examined peer interaction in racially mixed grade classrooms. The results showed that considerably more cross-racial interactions occurred when they were task oriented; and when within race interactions occurred, they were more social in orientation. However, students preferred to socialize along gender lines more often than along interracial lines.

Implications for Teachers of Teachers

As students, Black girls may not display the passive or submissive behaviors apparently preferred by teachers. Moreover, the displays of independence and assertiveness may be disconcerting to teachers who adhere to preconceived notions of acceptable behavior for female students. However, it may not be possible to change stereotypical attitudes and perceptions held by teachers. It becomes a responsibility of educators to recognize when they are regarding children inappropriately by fostering gender-race stereotypes that perpetuate negative societal expectations.

The literature points out some of the obstacles in the interaction between teachers and students when teachers hold a negative perception of Black females. More than any other factor, the research implies that teacher-bias can jeopardize the academic and psycho-social development of Black females. Therefore, it becomes incumbent upon educators, who prepare teachers, to train them to include learning activities which are directed at fostering race and sex equity in the curriculum of the schools.

The results of these studies should be cause for concern for educators. The research suggests, as does Weinberg that, "The attainment of high-quality education for all requires far more than a declaration of lofty intentions (1983, p. 164)." Although Black female students may encounter varying degrees of difficulty in schools, many of them persist and earn high academic achievements and honors. Their accomplishments under the circumstances is remarkable.

Several theories may help to explain their successes. One notion is that Black females have benefited from the positive-negative effect (Epstein, 1973). Another is that Black females have developed several prized attributes usually ascribed to men by the larger society— independence, a desire for success, self-assertion, ambition, drive, etc. which are qualities either learned or earned, and are not granted by anyone regardless of gender or race. Lastly, the

visibility of Black women throughout the Black community substantiates their important functions whether they are successful professional women or heads of households. The presence of these Black women affirms young Black females as significant individuals (Harrison, 1974).

Strategies

At least two strategies could facilitate efforts to better address this student population: (1) assist educators to assess their own individual biases and (2) reassess teacher training programs.

Individual Biases. A plethora of data affirms that continuous efforts must be made to help teachers recognize their own gender and race biases. The most difficult task for individuals is to assess their own attitudes and biases toward those who are different from themselves. Nowhere is this more needed than in working with Black female students. Research shows that many variables affect the development of biased attitudes. Because, the role teachers play in the intellectual growth and psychological development of children is critical, they must strive to alter their biases toward children, particularly as those biases relate to Black females. Specific strategies should be included in the educational curriculum to aid them in this endeavor.

Training Programs. Traditionally, the curriculum for teacher education focuses on various aspects of the discipline: teaching methods, educational foundations, practice teaching, and required courses for state certification. Many citizens would argue that the curriculum should be based on social and educational values. Moreover, research provides clear evidence that teachers treat Black female students differently in classrooms.

Thus, strategies must be developed that promote teacher and student actions consistent with the values of equal treatment. In other words, teachers must be trained to recognize that Black girls have a right to be taught academic skills in addition to being taught non-academic social skills.

Teacher training programs provide minimal opportunities for prospective candidates to interact with students prior to their teaching assignments or to learn about the community where they will do their practice teaching. Because of the difficulties encountered with Black female students in desegregated classrooms, educators need to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge so that they, in turn, can develop learning activities that afford Black female students opportunities to demonstrate their competence among their peers (St. John and Lewis, 1975).

Additional research is needed to analyze the personal strengths, achievement motivations and coping mechanisms that contribute to the academic success of this population. To achieve this goal, "First we must decide that Black girls are precious people whose experiences are worthy of study" (Lightfoot 1976, p. 259).

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