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Recognizing Black LGBTQ Students in Schools

Joselyn L. Parker

[*Image description: A feminine-presenting Black person wearing a PPE mask, standing in front of a Pride flag with their arms spread.]*

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[Image description: A group of people engaging in a Pride parade. Centered is a feminine-presenting Black person, raising a small Pride flag, and smiling.]

."..school practitioners and educators can take an active stance toward changing homophobic and transphobic school climates into places where LGBTQ+ students have their most basic needs met: their safety. **- Alyssa Chrisman & Mollie Blackburn**

As educators, it is immensely important to recognize the ways in which students with multiple oppressed identities experience life in a far more execrable way. Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989, explains its meaning by char-acterizing the way identities are multiply interrelated. In her original explanation, Crenshaw used the term to represent the various ways that race and gender interact to shape the many layers of Black women's employment experiences. She says that "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking separately at the women's race or gender in relation her those experiences" (Crenshaw, 1991 p. 1244).

Relatedly, we must consider how the identities of students in multiple minoritized groups (e.g. BIPOC and queer[1]) have experiences that are not included in the traditional boundaries around race and sexuality, as they are implicitly for white queer youth (Brockenbrough, 2015). By not considering the unique challenges of Black queer youth, even so-called well-intentioned educational systems will further exacerbate inequities for all of their students, but specifically their queer students of Color, who are already living in the world that criticizes their lives more harshly (Brockenbrough, 2015). By centering Black queer students' lives in equity-focused work, we establish the sense of urgency needed from educators, parents, and community members to disrupt and dismantle anti-Black and homophobic ideals that are prominent within educational institutions, moving toward a more inclusive learning environment for all youth.

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[1]Queer is an umbrella term that covers all sexual and gender identities other than straight and cisgender. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people may all identify with the word queer, as does this newsletter's author. For more about the history of this term, and different perspectives on its usage, see https://www.glaad.org/reference/lgbtq

[Image description: Photo of a large crowd, standing in two, intersecting circles.]

Breaking Down Oppressions at the Intersection of Blackness and Queerness

In 2019, Nigel Shelby was a 15-year-old gay Black boy from Huntsville, Alabama who took his own life after enduring ongoing bullying from his peers about his perceived sexuality: bullying that was met with no relief from school leadership. Unfortunately, the number of Black children who commit suicide has been on the rise in recent years (Al-Mateen & Rogers, 2018). Relatedly, Black youth report higher rates of poor mental health such as post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic depression (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Lindsey et al., 2006), and because Shelby was both Black and queer, intersectional oppressions made him even more vulnerable to such an outcome. In order to understand why students like Nigel are so vulnerable, we must understand the ideals of anti-Blackness and homophobia in American schools systems.

Anti-Blackness in Schools

US K12 schools historically have had negative impacts on Black youth. One of the most salient examples has been through disproportionate practices of exclusion and isolation within discipline practices (Rose et al., 2017). Black students make up 15.5 percent of all public school students, but represent 30 percent of students suspended from school (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018). Coles and Powell (2018) argue that school suspensions are inherently anti-Black, removing and excluding Black youth from the learning environment, subsequently guiding them into unproductive pathways in life. Further, research shows that Black youth are treated as if they are intellectually inferior, inherently criminal, and less than human (Anderson 1988; Delpit 2006). Within schools, as well as in the larger society, Black youth are perceived as being able to cope with higher levels of suffering and pain (Waytz et al, 2014), which has resulted in a immense amount of institutional abuse, or spirit murdering (Love 2016; Henry & Warren 2016), a practice that over time has become so normalized that many do not even recognize that it is happening. These consistent and systemic acts of violence against Black youth reenforce negative stereotypes in the dominant narrative, and establishes cultural hegemony (Coles, 2016). To explain the effect of punishment practices placed upon Black youth in American schools, Ferguson (2010) describes the symbolic violence as “the painful, damaging, mortal wound inflicted on [Black youth] by the wielding of words, symbols and standards” (p. 51). These effects, then, translate into mistreatment in society as a whole.

Homophobia in Schools

Schools operate under a systemic set of values that set the standard for what is right and wrong, good and bad, whose voices are heard and whose are erased, who is granted access and who is not. For LGBTQ youth, their very being violates the societal standard of “normal,” and therefore they are the least likely to have access to resources and opportunities in school because of discrimination and victimization (Pender & Hope, 2019). Youth who identify as LGBTQ or queer are among the most victimized, especially during their adolescent years (Russell, 2002). Queer youth are more likely to experience victimization at school as a result of being a sexual minority (DuRant et al 1998; Rusell et al., 2002; Truong et al., 2020). Teachers and administrators (un)consciously participate in the process of discrimination, victimization, and erasure within their classrooms at school when they allow, fail to disrupt, or at times encourage, students to make derogatory remarks about LGBTQ students (Blackburn & McCready, 2009).

Queer youth also experience a much more difficult time at school, which often results in their missing multiple days, struggling academically, and ultimately dropping out (Rusell et al 2020; Truong et al., 2020). Queer youth are also at higher risk of being homeless (Morton et al., 2018), becoming substance users/abusers (Scannapieco et al., 2018), and being more sexually risky. While there is a growing body of research focused on the issues of queer youth in the United States, much of the academic research fails to consider how those challenges are compounded and intensified for Black queer youth who are at the intersections of racism, homophobia, and transphobia. Nigel, like me and many Black queer youth, struggle to be seen within an anti-Black, homophobic educational system. Matthews (2019) asserts that anti-Blackness is meant to inflict harm on Black lives, towards maintaining Black subjugation; the same ideas can be applied to homophobia, as it is innately meant to devalue, minimize, and bring harm to gay lives. For youth who identify as both Black and queer, carrying the weight of such heavily scrutinized identities can feel unbearable; when those realities go unacknowledged in schools it can create lifelong, and even life-ending, effects for Black queer students.

[Image description: A group of people, mostly people of Color, engaging in a protest march. A sign reads, "protect black trans women."]

What Can Educators do to Disrupt Anti-Blackness and Homophobia in Schools?

There is an urgent need for the disruption of anti-Black and homophobic educational practices within US schools. There must be a strategic response from administrators, teachers, students, and community members that focuses on negotiating and expanding our understanding of inclusivity and power relationships in schools. It is important to ask questions that center projects in humanization (Kinlock & San Pedro, 2014) in the discourse of educational change that create opportunities for all students to be be made visible and create agency over their lives. We must hold ourselves and others accountable for failing to implement anti-racist and anti-homophobic policies, privileging some voices over others. We must ask ourselves why there is resistance to discuss racism and homophobia in schools, and how our everyday actions are reproducing these oppressions. As Lawrence and Tatum (1997) show, breaking the silence is also about identifying the sources of resistance to learning about race, racism, and other differences. We must draw from a critical lens when examining the destructive nature of stereotypes, fostering intentionality in classrooms for all students. This is how we disrupt; we engage in critical self-reflection, asking, “What am I doing to ensure that all of my students are represented? How do the intersectional oppressions of my students affect the way they see themselves and are seen in my classroom? What am I doing to make that better?”

As educators, addressing the concerns of Black LGBTQ students means we must take an intersectional approach that considers all aspects of students’ experiences, including racism, homophobia, and transphobia. If everyone does their part, we can begin to create opportunities for all Black LGBTQ youth to succeed academically and socially, in a safe environment that promotes diversity and inclusion – an environment that is working toward complete liberation in schools and the larger society.

In my personal experience working with teachers and school administrators, some expressed that talking about racism, homophobia, and gender identity can be difficult at times, but I argue that *not* talking about those topics can be be even more difficult for students who exist at these intersections.

Here are a few considerations to assist educators in supporting their Black LGBTQ students:

- Acknowledgement. It may seem cliché but recognizing the history of racism, homophobia, and transphobia in educational institutions is the first step toward creating lasting solutions.
- Get educated on the topic. School administrators should provide professional development opportunities for school staff to address the intersections of identities and the experiences of Black LGBTQ students. If your school does not offer professional development, there a number of resources available (https://www.glsen.org/professional-development) that will help you to be more prepared for support your students.
- Help start a GSA (Gender and Sexualities Alliance) and/or and an ethnic/cultural club. Schools that have GSAs and ethnic/cultural clubs can help students address the needs of Black LGBTQ students and create space for them to discuss their multiple marginalized identities.
- Representation Matters! Create space in your curriculum that includes diversity and positive representations of Black and LGBTQ people.
- Strive to make your class equitable. While it may seem overwhelming to try and make changes in the whole school, making small changes in your own classroom that support the visibility of all students goes a long way.
- Have a response plan. Be sure that your school has clear guidelines for responding to anti-LGBTQ and racist behavior. Develop confidential ways for students to report victimization, and hold those who are victimizing others fully accountable.

Conclusion

Sometimes I wonder how different my life would have been if my educational experiences were inclusive. How would I have seen my teenage self if I had been learning about diversity in ways that included Black and queer identities? Would I have been spared years of depression? As educators, it is important to recognize, affirm, and respect all parts of your students. You can teach them that they are not alone, from the posters in your room to the texts in your curriculum. You can show them that they matter in your classrooms, and society more broadly, by fighting racism, homophobia, and transphobia and revealing and unraveling white supremacist ideology and cisheteronormativity. In doing so, you can show all of your students how to make this world a better place.

Final Note from a Black Queer Learner

As a Black queer learner, I have experienced feeling like I could never fully and authentically be myself within any space. In school, I barely read books with Black characters in them, and the mere idea of a book with queer characters was completely unheard of. As a Black queer learner, I was never given the chance to learn about the beauty of LGBTQ history in my school's curriculum; in fact, the messages that I received about LGBTQ people were messages of hate or disgust and that queer people were unnatural and abnormal. Unfortunately, those ideals were not only coming from students, but they were also validated by teachers, administrators, staff, and my community and church.

For me, the struggle of existing in a world that doesn't fully recognize Blackness or queerness in schools, or in the larger society, resulted in years of depression and an inability to see myself or my ways of being as valuable. Therefore, I spent much of my childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood struggling to fit into a heteronormative society, with the hopes that no one could see through the façade I was living: the façade of pretending not to be queer just avoid further isolation, harassment, and exclusion. Years later, I realized that what I was experiencing was the result of how the intersectionality of my identities (Black, queer) has been historically situated within society, which in turn was reflected in educational institutions. I began to understand that my very being was in direct conflict with the ideals and discourses of the dominant society (White, cis-male, heterosexual), and that each part of who I am was being separately scrutinized under the ideals of normativity. The combination of each marginalized identity created multiple dimensions of my experiences and further complicated how I was seen in the world.

About the Author

Joselyn L. Parker is currently a doctoral student at The Ohio State University studying Multicultural and Equity Studies in Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning. Parker's current research focuses on the effects of racism and homophobia in predominately Black communities and schools and how Black K12 administrators create safe, inclusive and equitable spaces for their Black queer students. Parker, a professional public speaker and social justice activist, is also the founder of SPEAK Project Ohio, a non-profit agency located in Franklin county.

Meet the Author

This June 2021 issue of Equity Dispatch was written by Joselyn L. Parker

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