Caution, Approaching Intersection: Black Educators Teaching in the Crossroads of Resistance and Responsiveness

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Abstract

As a powerful institution of social reproduction, schools are locations in which racial inequalities and anti-Black racism play out in ways that contribute to the larger racial disparities that many Black communities experience. The way race informs the experiences of Black students in schools justifies the need for anti-racist and anti-bias teaching in education programs. In this paper, we argue that anti-racist and anti-bias education should be rooted in intersectional leadership and pedagogical approaches. We do so by first describing why intersectional leadership matters, particularly in preparing educators and leaders in working with Black students in school. We then describe our own positionality as Black scholars and educators working in a predominantly White private university and how our own positionality informs why this work is important to us. In particular, we focus on the ways in which we prepare future educators to engage in resistance and responsiveness on behalf of Black students and conclude with implications for anti-racist and anti-bias discourse development.

Keywords: anti-racist education, Black educators, intersectionality, leadership

Introduction

Within the current moment, there is a national awakening to the reality of the enduring effects of White supremacy, anti-Black racism, and racial inequality on the lived experiences and social outcomes of Black communities across the United States. Stoked by national leadership that continues to promote fear, hatred, and violence towards communities of color, we have witnessed an increase in White supremacist organizations and racial attacks towards communities of color (Giroux, 2017; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). In particular, national conversations continue regarding the nature of policing, the murders of unarmed Black citizens at the hands of law enforcement, and the lack of justice afforded Black communities who disproportionately experience both physical and symbolic violence at the hands of state institutions (Alexander, 2012; Garza, et al., 2016; Weissinger & Mack, 2018). Furthermore, we are witnessing a global movement, inspired by Black women, that is calling for the recognition that Black lives matter and for a renewed liberation movement that seeks an intersectional approach to racial justice on matters related to not only police brutality, criminal justice reform, and economic justice, but also to justice in educational opportunity for Black students (Garza et al., 2016; Howard, 2016).

As a powerful institution of social reproduction, schools are locations in which racial inequalities and anti-Black racism play out in ways that contribute to the larger racial disparities that many Black communities experience. For instance, Black students still largely attend racially and economically segregated schools that in many cases are more segregated now than before *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Orfield et al., 2016; Reardon, 2016). Black students attend schools that are inequitably funded; they are regularly provided a curriculum that is culturally irrelevant and renders Black histories and experiences invisible (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018; Reardon, 2016). Additionally, Black students are denied educational opportunity when educators (a) assume that Black students are less intelligent or anti-intellectual; (b) lower their expectations for their Black students and use these racist assumptions to justify tracking Black students into lower ability courses; and (c) disproportionately place Black students into special education programs

(Gregory & Roberts, 2017; Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Lynn et al. 2010; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013).

The general fear of Black bodies that informs the type of physical and symbolic violence experienced at the hands of law enforcement and criminal justice systems is similarly experienced within the disciplining nature of the school. Within the school, the behaviors and cultural practices of Black students are perceived as threatening, intimidating, or foreign, and the cultural incompetence of educators contributes to Black students being disproportionately disciplined, surveilled, and pushed out of school (Allen, 2017; Bryan, 2017; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Morris, 2016). Black students are more likely to attend schools with heavy police presence, to be disproportionately punished with harsher offenses, and be subjected to what is widely known as the school-to-prison pipeline (Carter et al., 2017; Nolan & Willis, 2011; Pigott et al., 2018).

The way race informs the experiences of Black students in schools justifies the need for anti-racist and anti-bias teaching in education programs. In this paper, we argue that anti-racist and anti-bias education should be rooted in intersectional leadership and pedagogical approaches. We do so first by describing why intersectional leadership matters, particularly in preparing educators and leaders in working with Black students in school. We then describe our own positionality as Black scholars and educators working in a predominantly White private university and how our own positionality informs why this work is important to us.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

The anti-bias and anti-racism work we do separately in two different academic programs spawned our conceptual consensus to ground this article in intersectional leadership (Miles Nash & Peters, 2020; Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). This (nascent) leadership framework is rooted in intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), a theory that has long outlined the simultaneity of marginalization individuals face, including racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. Since intersectionality originated amidst critical legal studies' efforts to acknowledge the "problematic consequence of the

tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139), it has been used as a theoretical treatment specifically to document the lived experiences of women of color across sectors, including educational (Haynes et al., 2020; Ireland, 2018), community (Tan et al., 2018), governmental (Hamidullah & Riccucci, 2017), and business (Steinfield, 2019) contexts.

Dill and Zambrama (2000) proffer that beyond being a theoretical treatment through which researchers explore their intellectual concerns, intersectionality-centered work reflects our actions and "effort[s] to improve society, in part, by understanding and explaining the lives and experiences of marginalized people and by examining the constraints and demands of the many social structures that influence their options and opportunities" (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p. 3). Accordingly, research that privileges students' and educators' experiences with intersectionality helps teacher and leader educators understand how to develop, improve, and sustain anti-bias and anti-racist pedagogies.

In education, the multiple ways that intersectionality influences the lives of students (Grant & Zwier, 2011; Morris, 2007), teachers (Jones & Wijeyesinghe, 2011), and leaders (Agosto & Roland, 2018; Horsford & Tillman, 2012) have been documented across scholarship. The prevalent usage of intersectionality in explications centering each of these groups has helped scholars and practitioners understand how and the extent to which multiple oppressive forces influence them. The usage of the theory in research focused on students shows how the compounding influences of racialized and class-based marginalization can affect student access to educational opportunities (Becares & Priest, 2015). This literature suggests that understanding students' dispositions based on these facets of their lives can be useful in developing curriculum and programming that supports their navigation of schooling contexts. This development is the responsibility of educators, whose professional interactions are also explored using intersectionality.

Intersectional Leadership

Research detailing educators' experiences interrogates how

their race and gender can influence their teaching and leading (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). While most teachers are women (U.S. Department of Education, 2020), experiences of women of color differ from those of their White colleagues (Fairchild et al., 2012). This reality mirrors how, in education, as in other contexts, there are long-standing dangers in focusing on singularity in efforts to interrupt oppression. Further, as teachers aspire to and secure school and district leadership positions, they disproportionately face challenges because of their limited access to professional development and opportunities, in addition to those challenges due to their race and gender identities. While their professional trajectories can be fraught with these multi-layered trials, their intersectionality also informs the empathy with which they work to remedy the same challenges their students traverse. As intersectionality ineluctably apprises leaders of what their students experience and inspires their commitments to support students, we responsively substantiated our work through the construct of intersectional leadership−leaders' operationalization of visionary strategies that privilege the experiences of constituents (e.g., students) who live the realities of multiple historically oppressive identifiers−to name the pedagogies we use to create anti-bias, anti-racist instruction in our independent liberal arts college of educational studies.

A Black Woman Educator's Positionality Statement

As the first author, I identify as a Black, cisgender, heterosexual woman. My research is informed by my experiences teaching and leading in K-20 institutions and privileges the emboldening of Black girls and women in the K-20 education, the professional intersectional realities of Black women in education, and the ways that educators and educational leaders support underserved students in STEM education. My research endeavors mirror my awareness of and interest in the strategies educators use to engage, uplift, and prepare students for the future lives they will lead in a world steeped in a historicity of racialized, gendered, and class-based marginalization. Aimed at combating oppression and normalizing anti-racism's emancipatory strategies, I develop and carry out research and instruction that reifies the theories and

frameworks that acknowledge students' intersectionality.

The paramountcy of intersectionality has recently become palpably evident across society as more visible examples of racism, sexism, and classism have permeated the spaces where we live and learn. Throughout this change, I have remained committed to using my research and instruction as mechanisms for informing students and educators about how they can combat these levers of discrimination.

As an Assistant Professor in a Masters of Arts in Leadership Development program at a predominately White institution, I am responsible for preparing graduate students to lead in educational, community, corporate, and governmental contexts in ways that promote a socially just world. In my instruction of courses that focus on foundational leadership theories, leadership in nonprofit organizations, leadership across social issues, and of a doctoral-level course in diversity in higher education, I address the oppressive effects of discriminatory practices through assignments that empower students to assess the critical role of leadership in disrupting biased policies and practices. Through this form of agential pedagogy, I teach students how to expand their abilities and capacities to lead with equity, courage, and empathy at the forefront.

A Black Woman Educator's Teaching Experiences

My identity, the nexus of my Blackness and my womanhood, is the bedrock of my teaching approach. As an amalgam of both racial and gendered experiences that are influenced, and in many cases dictated by historized exclusion, this identity is a unique disposition from which I plan and deliver instruction that equips students with the skills necessary to think critically about the past as they prepare for their professions in the future. As one of the few Black women faculty in our private, Southern California institution, I understand that my very presence and my commitment to teaching from an asset-based perspective towards students and communities of color are acts of anti-racism and endurance. By being part of the small ratio of Black faculty on campus, I counter the hegemonic norms represented by the majority faculty demographic in academe: White men, who are

54% of full-time faculty (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The diversity of thought based on experience that academicians of color add through their research and teaching expands and improves higher education contexts because it offers more than a single, prototypical perspective.

The simultaneity of ostracization resulting from both my race and gender influence the reasons and ways that I develop and conduct courses. The racialized and gendered realities I face influence why I navigate teaching commitments and experiences with an understanding of their compounding effects. In turn, this positionality informs why I readily am able to seek and include examples in my teaching of educational leaders in ways that reflect the intersectionality and additional identity factors that are prevalent in communities they will go on to serve. While the lenses of Blackness and womanhood influence my life most evidently, I unapologetically acknowledge the equally impactful influence of similarly aligned facets of life that impact others' lives, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, ability, and educational attainment. Moreover, the range of nuanced experiences I have had because of my race and gender reifies the continuum of effects each identifier can have on individuals' lives.

I employ intersectional leadership by considering my students' resources, talents, and needs, as well as those of the communities they will go on to serve. I subsequently engage these considerations as I create and employ courses in which I teach students about leadership theories, leadership enactment across different community contexts and social issues, and diversity in higher education. Intersectionality informs several facets of my pedagogy in these courses, including curriculum development, assignment flexibility, contextual responsiveness, and technology usage. Developing an amalgam of instructional techniques, I intentionally foster learning experiences that reflect students' aspirations of leading in a diverse array of societal sectors and illustrate the social justice issues I know they will face in those sectors, all within the context of their leadership development.

My intersectional leadership fructifies my pedagogical approaches in each course I teach. The foundation of these intentions rests on my commitment to decolonizing existing

curriculum by expanding the texts, assignments, and resources used to develop courses. When selecting texts, including textbooks and research articles, I am mindful of the authors, and subsequently, the perspectives, represented in the material in which we engage. Acknowledging the historicity of marginalization in the academy via scholarship publishing practices, preferential treatment of research topics, deficitized positioning of demographics and results, and the prioritization of research methods, I choose books and articles that demonstrate an array of perspectives. Further, to strengthen the curricular offerings and the instructional delivery, I include additional mediums, including websites, art, music, government documents, social media, film, television, and theater. The coalesced presentation of these resources provides a well-rounded bedrock that reflects an in-depth diversity of thought and underpins our class discussions. Simultaneously, these perspectives inform the course assignments students complete during the semester.

To model responsiveness to societal contexts and to students' professional and personal interests, I offer flexibility in the assignments they are required to develop. I use this approach to hold up mirrors to students so they can identify the agency they have in developing projects that make a difference in the world that envelops them. For example, to teach about leadership in our Images of Leadership in Pop Culture course, students are given the opportunity to watch a contemporary or historical film and subsequently develop a website that displays their identification of leadership examples in the characters and the ways their traits align with leadership theories we have studied. Most recently, when teaching this course in Summer 2020, I demonstrated responsiveness to the heightened awareness of racialized injustices present in the policing of communities of color and in the criminal justice system by offering students the opportunity to base their leadership websites on the limited film series, *When They See Us*, produced by Ava DuVernay, and on the accompanying interview, *When They See Us Now.*

Based on the 1989 wrongful arrests, convictions, and incarcerations of five boys of color in New York City, the series reflects the realities of communities of color and, as four of

the boys were Black, the particular histories of discrimination that have been detrimental. By guiding students through the identification of leadership evidenced in the characters portrayed, including the teenagers, their parents and families, their attorneys, prosecuting attorneys, police, prison personnel, and community members, in the context of a high-profile case, I was able to help students understand the nuanced racialized influences readily evident in communities. Many students expressed appreciation for bringing this story to their attention, as they had not yet seen detailed and accurate depictions of the ways racism is embedded in societal systems. This exploration prompted in-depth discussions centering the role of leadership in driving change across these systems, including educational, non-profit, and governmental entities.

In another course focused on non-profit leadership, I deliberately included resources from a knowledge base that is often represented in the academy as a subject focus in research, but not as often positioned as a wealth of capital—the community. To counter this practice in a meaningful way that benefited students, I included in-class speakers from a diverse range of non-profit perspectives, including medical services, STEM education enrichment, out-of-school programming, and international relations. To further reflect the communities' needs as they learned about them, students had the option to develop grant proposals based on their knowledge and research regarding organizations' financial and programmatic needs, or applications to establish non-profit organizations based on identified gaps they wanted to address. Students were required to conduct interviews with non-profit organizational leaders to support students' development of grant proposals and non-profit organization applications. The informational interviews supported students' full understanding of the breadth and depth of leaders' responsibilities. Collectively, the experiences taught students about social contexts and the range of issues communities face within them, including bias and marginalization. Simultaneously, to counter deficitized narratives about the communities they explored and endeavor to eventually serve, the assignments guided students to identify cultural capital that communities possess.

A Black Man Educator's Positionality Statement

As the second author I identify as a Black cisgender, heterosexual male, who researches educational policies and practices that contribute to the educational achievement of Black boys and men. As a scholar who examines the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality in the schooling of Black boys, and as a Black man who has experienced raced-gendered discrimination within educational contexts, I draw upon both research and personal experience to inform how I engage in approaches to anti-racist and anti-bias education that emphasize the intersectionality of racial oppression that Black students encounter.

I currently teach in an undergraduate education program that prepares students to work in both school and community-based educational settings. The program curriculum is rooted in progressivist and critical approaches to education, and students are regularly engaged in critical discussions on race, social justice, and educational activism throughout the program. The students in this program will work in local Southern California communities that serve a culturally diverse student population. It is critical that these students are prepared to understand the significance of race in shaping educational policies and practice, and how the intersectionality of race matters in understanding and responding to the experiences and outcomes of Black students. It is also critical that they reflect on their own positionalities and privileges, understand how they might contribute to anti-black racism, benefit from white supremacy, and how they can enact agency in working to dismantle systems of racial oppression in their own work.

A Black Man Educator's Teaching Experiences

As a scholar-educator, my approach to anti-racist education is rooted in/informed by my research agenda that examines the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality in the educational achievement of Black boys and men, as well as my own experiences with racial discrimination. As a Black man, I know too well how race and gender intersect in the surveillance, discipline and ascriptions of intelligence that were imposed upon me in school. This embodied experience informs why it is critical that I convey to these students at a private, predominantly White

institution (PWI) that intersectionality matters in educational settings, why "other people's children" (Delpit, 1995) matters in educational settings, and how they can create education environments where Black students feel supported, validated and provided equitable opportunities to succeed.

Additionally, the act of preparing future educators to work with Black students is a matter of social justice and act of resistance. Education is not a neutral activity, but is indeed a political activity. It is imperative that we prepare our students, who are predominantly white middle-class women, to possess the dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed to engage in transformative practices in their communities, to approach the education of Black children as if those children were their own. Furthermore, it is important that our students understand the specificity of racial marginalization and the particular ways in which race and gender intersect in how Black students access educational opportunity.

I teach courses on the sociology of education, community-based education and undergraduate research methods. In these courses an intersectional leadership approach informs how I help students understand the implications of systemic racism in education and how it impacts Black boys specifically. This involves critically reviewing the history of race and education, including an examination of the history of racially segregated schools, the policies that led to racial segregation and the dilemmas of racial integration for Black students and Black educators. We also examine school policies related to racialized academic tracking and school discipline. In particular, we examine data that highlights the way that Black students are disproportionately tracked into lower ability courses and are over disciplined in school. This involves looking at both local and national data related to school tracking and school discipline and examining how and why Black students experience such outcomes at greater rates than their white counterparts.

We also spend time examining the assumptions that go into explanations of Black school failure. For many students, the educational outcomes for Black students are explained through cultural deficits−that is, students often assume that the reasons

for the poor educational outcomes for Black males is due to poor family involvement, deviant behaviors, or assumptions that Black males are anti-intellectual (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Howard, 2013; Ogbu, 1998).

These assumptions are rooted in larger racial stereotypes that pervade educator practices and are problematized by examining the history of racial discourse and ideology that assumes Black male deviance and criminality and identifying the ways such discourse has been used in the marginalization, exclusion and violence toward Black men at large. Certainly, these historical constructions and fear of the Black male are connected to current examples of violence toward Black bodies. Similar discourses of Black deviance and criminality are still used to justify anti-Black racism.

In my classes we examine how these ideologies play out in schools and how educators draw upon such ideologies in ways that contribute to lowered academic expectations, assumptions of deviance, and disproportionality in how Black boys are disciplined and denied educational opportunity. In doing so, we think critically about how race, gender and class intersect for Black boys in how they are perceived by predominantly white educators, and in the way that white fear and anxiety of the Black male body contributes to the specificity of Black male oppression in schools. We also challenge dominant deficit-based discourses by reading literature that acknowledges the strengths, resilience and cultural wealth of Black communities (Allen, 2013; Bonner, 2014; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2015; Moll et al. 1992; Watson, 2011; Yosso, 2005). This includes literature focusing on Black student success, Black student counterstories regarding their educational experiences, and anti-deficit research that describes the myriad of ways in which Black families support the education of their children through their school involvement, advocacy and activism (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Cooper, 2009; Kaplan, 2013; Oakes et al., 2008; Roxas & Gabriel, 2017; Vincent et al., 2012).

With this knowledge, I hope to prepare my students to become anti-racist advocates whose own educational practices will be rooted in an understanding of intersectionality, guided

by an ethics of care and motivated by the goal of racial justice for their students of color. For me, this work is done by engaging students in projects that embed them in the local community context and help students develop the tools to think critically about racial inequality, to acknowledge how they might benefit from their racial and economic privilege, but also to articulate how they might engage collectively in the struggle to dismantle systems of oppression in their own educational practices.

For instance, I teach a community-based education course that is held at an after-school program serving the culturally diverse community. In this course, students are immersed in the community context, work with the youth of the program, and learn about the social ecology of the community. The students are expected to teach, coach or lead activities with the youth at the program as part of the field experience; this provides opportunities for students to develop relationships with the youth, engage in critical listening practices with them, and learn how to respond to their realities.

As part of the curriculum of the course, the students engage in readings that problematize deficit-based discourses and thinking. They learn about the theories and practices of community cultural wealth as well as culturally responsive and culturally sustaining practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). They also learn to read and critically analyze local school and census data both to understand better the education, economic and political reality of the community, and to identify potential equity gaps as the first step in identifying solutions. For instance, students examine data related to income inequality and housing insecurity as well as data related to school discipline and school funding. Students identify how race, class, and gender might intersect in particular ways in the experiences of the students they are serving and how certain school and social policies might contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality. I also require students to spend time in the community, attending local events, following local news, and engaging in dialogue with the local community members who are involved in the after-school program.

Students are also guided through a community mapping project, where they identify the resources available in the community

such as non-profits, churches or libraries. This information is collected through online searches, community walks, and discussions with local community members and participating youth. Furthermore, as students are engaging in their fieldwork with the youth, they are asked to identify the types of community cultural wealth the youth might possess and the assets the youth exhibit. Students then consider how they might draw upon the strengths of the youth to support their learning.

As the instructor of the course, I also participate in the fieldwork activities and see the youth attending the after-school program as my own children who deserve the same opportunities to succeed and be recognized. Teaching this course provides me an opportunity to enter into community spaces with my students and model what it might look like to engage in culturally responsive and anti-racist educational practices. I am also able to engage in an ethic of care in these spaces, demonstrating love, compassion and advocacy for the youth, while also challenging deficits or discriminating assumptions my students might display about the children and the community.

Throughout the course, students have opportunities to reflect on their initial assumptions, biases, and fears of the youth, to consider how these assumptions are rooted in racist ideologies, and to examine how they might perpetuate and benefit from racial inequalities. In particular, students often compare the local community to their own communities; many notice the stark racial and economic segregation and the way such inequalities greatly impact the opportunities and outcomes for the youth of color they are serving in the program.

It's also important that students begin to see themselves as advocates for their youth and to care deeply about their well-being, but also to understand why their own racial advocacy is necessary and important in the struggle for racial equity. Based on the knowledge obtained throughout the course, the students are asked to describe how their new knowledge might inform their practice and to provide recommendations that can address the racial equity gaps that were explored throughout the course. This is done to help students see their role in the greater project for racial justice and begin to develop the habits of an anti-racist educator.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued why intersectionality matters in understanding and responding to the needs of Black students in schools. We have articulated how intersectional leadership informs why and how we engage in anti-racist and anti-bias practices in preparing future educators and leaders. In particular, we've emphasized the need for future educators to be responsive to the communities they will serve and have tried to model what such responsiveness might look like in support of Black girls and boys specifically, and of students of color in general.

As Black faculty researching and teaching in a private, predominantly White liberal arts university and preparing a predominantly White middle-class population to serve in the communities we aim to protect and uplift, we are mindful of the context in which we do this work. We recognize how our presence in these spaces is in itself decolonizing. Our bodies, epistemologies, lived experiences, and racialized scholarly agendas are acts of resistance within an institution that has historically contributed to anti-blackness, racial marginalization, and racial stratification. In other words, as Black faculty we exist in a privileged space where our presence is critical to the disruption of anti-Black racism. Our lived experiences and scholarly knowledge are important contributions to the diversity of thought students are exposed to on campus and in the classroom.

As Black educators teaching predominantly White students, we are also mindful of the various ways in which students might receive and/or reject our identities and the knowledge we provide regarding the intersectional experiences of Black students. Like many future educators, our students might resist discussions regarding race and racism and might reject both the knowledge we are sharing as well as the messenger who is delivering this knowledge (Milner, 2008; Picower, 2009; Smith, 2004). Students might also appropriate such knowledge as a form of capital to be used to demonstrate their own "wokeness." This means that students might learn the language of social justice, anti-racism, and anti-bias discourse, and employ such language largely as a performative act and to their personal benefit without truly embodying anti-racist and anti-bias practices in their personal

and professional lives (Watson, 2020). However, we hope that through our own practices as anti-racist and anti-bias educators, in concert with the work of other colleagues on campus engaging in similar social justice efforts, our students will develop a critical consciousness regarding anti-Black racism and intersectional marginalization. Through this critical consciousness, we aim to prepare future educators who can embody intersectional leadership and engage in emancipatory practices that are rooted in both an ethics of care and a motivation for social justice.

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