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Where our Girls at? The Misrecognition of Black and Brown girls in schools

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Where Our Girls At? The Misrecognition of Black and Brown Girls in Schools

Amanda E. Lewis and Deana G. Lewis



Black and Brown girls are often marginalized, not only in society and in schools, but in research about schools; their experiences and needs are relegated to the sidelines or disregarded entirely.¹ In this essay we argue for careful consideration of the specific ways that Black and Brown raced and gendered identities render these girls vulnerable and put them in jeopardy. Dangers abound, not only from approaches that focus exclusively on gender or exclusively on race/ethnicity, but from colorblind or other supposedly race-neutral approaches that render these girls more rather than less vulnerable (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007), and make educators and scholars more likely to be complicit in their marginalization.

We focus on just a few of the many ways that this marginalization happens. We provide two classroom vignettes that capture dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility. While these dynamics may seem to be diametrically opposite, both involve the process of what Fraser (2000) called misrecognition: “To be misrecognized... is to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem” (p. 113).

¹ Here we are focused primarily on cisgender (non-trans) girls’ experiences. We recognize that these experiences of marginality become even more intensified for trans youth, non-binary youth, and queer youth.

Invisibility

In one study of race making, the first author spent a year doing daily participant observation in two urban schools in a West Coast city—a Spanish immersion school that was predominantly Latinx² and White, and a multiracial neighborhood school (Lewis, 2003). While reading through her fieldnotes for emerging patterns, she discovered a critical absence: despite the fact that they were represented in high numbers in both schools, Latinx students were largely missing from the fieldnotes. And this was in a school where most of the students were first- or second-generation Chicanas. In each school’s hectic classrooms, her notes documented action, vocal exchanges, tensions, lesson plans, and who was getting called on and how. But she had not “taken note of” those whose hands weren’t going up, those who weren’t asking for help, those who were never out of their seats.

After that discovery, she spent the next few weeks closely watching Latinxs in these classrooms and discovered that their lack of visibility was not confined to fieldnotes, but to classroom processes more generally. Fieldnotes thereafter captured moments when these girls were placed in reading groups not because of their reading level but because of their “flexibility” in peer group dynamics; moments when they sat quietly at their desks, confused about the assignment, not asking for help, not causing any disruption; and entire math periods with classwork left undone and no one taking notice. These girls moved through the school day largely staying under the radar, ignored by teachers and not asking for assistance. Socially and academically, their needs remained firmly on the margins. Far from idiosyncratic, this echoes similar work that has found that students of color often feel less connected to teachers who lack the will or the ability to fully engage them (Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). What would be possible if Black and Latinx girls’ educational experiences were centered in schools and classrooms?³

Hypervisibility

In a recent book, the first author described life at Riverview High School, a well-resourced suburban school in the Midwest with a very diverse study body (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). While the study focused on understanding the racial achievement gap at the school, one of the key sets of findings focused on subtle daily disciplinary practices. These disciplinary routines were recognized by almost everyone in the school to be racially inflected (at minimum).

² Latinx is a gender-neutral term that takes the place of Latina and Latino to refer to people of Latin American descent.

³ As Carter (2005, 2012) has discussed, negative racial climates in schools have multiple consequences for students who have to contend with institutional messages that negatively characterize their identities and cultural repertoires.

Lewis and Diamond (2015), like other researchers, found that Black boys were subject to high levels of monitoring and discipline. But they also found that Black girls were subject to unfair treatment related to a quite different set of stereotypes or, as Collins (2000) describes, controlling images. Black girls' bodies were understood differently, rendered problematic, and "adultified" in distinct but still problematic ways (Ferguson, 2000). A key example was how the school "policed" violations of school dress codes. The rules, as described in the school handbook, read:

Brief and revealing clothing are not appropriate in school. Examples include tank or halter tops, garments with spaghetti straps or strapless garments; clothing that is "see-through," cut low, or exposes one's midriff; or skirts that are shorter than 3-inches above the knee.

An internet search revealed similar language in school discipline codes from around the country. These seem to be common expectations in many high schools. However, as one teacher explained, girls were being assessed through adults' racialized lenses that perceived only some of them to be in violation:

We had a policy that the girls couldn't have their belly showing. All you saw walking in the hall [was] girls with their white bellies out. Black girls sent home. They [Black girls] were pissed off. [One Black student] said, "Well, why are you saying something to me. I'm sitting up in a room with six white girls with their stomach out and you pick me out of the group."

As this teacher described, girls are not always passive recipients of such differential discipline. Tiffany, a junior at the school noted, "They tried to get me one year but I wasn't havin' it. I put up a fight. I said, 'You know, that's not fair.'" And girls like Tiffany regularly resist being framed as a problem. Yet even as they resist, they learn important lessons about how their raced and gendered identities subject them to scrutiny.

All the Girls are White, All the Blacks are Boys...

In cases of both invisibility and hypervisibility, these girls are experiencing the full brunt of misrecognition—having a wide range of raced and gendered tropes projected onto their bodies as they are simultaneously denied access to the kinds of educational experiences they need and deserve. Misrecognition is a problem not only in schools, but in research about schools. When attention is called to the needs of girls or the crisis around Black and Brown children, familiar patterns emerge where a focus on girls' experiences is about mostly White girls and a focus on Black or Latinx students'

experiences centers on boys (Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). In research about gender or girls' performance in the classroom, White, middle-class girls are considered the norm (Evans-Winters, 2011; Morris, 2007; Morris 2012, 2016). In educational research on disproportionality in school discipline, Black girls' experiences are on the sidelines (Morris, 2012; Noguera, 2003, 2008). These girls are not only misrecognized in schools but also marginalized in research on student experiences in schools.

Schools should strive to be places of sanctuary where students' full humanity is acknowledged, their developmentally appropriate struggles are recognized—places where we help them figure out who they want to be in the world, and we help them to gain the skills they need to realize their aspirations. We can only know whether schools are falling short if educational leaders, scholars, and policymakers put Black and Brown girls at the center of our attention with a keen eye to the multiple ways they are often misrecognized. It is our responsibility as educators and researchers to ensure that these young women are written into schooling and educational narratives to underscore the importance of their experiences and contributions to the world.

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