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Black Teachers: Surrogate Parents and Disciplinarians

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Abstract: This article uses aspects of critical race theory (CRT) to examine the uncommon emotional and psychological and other school-related responsibilities experienced by Black teachers as they discharge their duties as educators. The CRT tenet color blindness explores the degree to which schools fail to acknowledge the color of non-white teachers. The interest convergence principle of CRT critiques how school districts are served by Black teachers serving as school disciplinarians. Intersectionality refers to the discrimination against teachers on the basis of race and another identifiable factor. Despite their best efforts, Black educators are regularly typecast as disciplinarians for Black students. Additionally, Black teachers are charged with serving as veritable parents within educational settings, rendering scores of exceedingly qualified educators willing to serve, but also overburdened and sometimes disillusioned with the additional duties. This writing prompts additional research to further examine this understudied phenomenon.

Keywords: Black teachers, Black educators

For many years, Black teachers have endured significant and stiff opposition to their seamless integration into the educational workforce. Especially injurious to Black teachers, implicit bias prevents scores of Black educators from receiving advancement opportunities once hired, despite their intellectual and pedagogical prowess (George, 2015). Implicit bias is interpreted as the cognitive process that causes people to have adverse feelings and attitudes about others based on qualities like age, race, religion, ethnicity, and appearance (Rudd, 2014). Implicit bias occurs unconsciously, therefore, people are normally not cognizant of the scope or degree of its intensity. Some of the implicit bias directed at Black teachers can take the form of barring Black educators from various career options due to negatively held preconceived ideas, and the employment of deficit thinking in connection with the capacity of Black teachers (Rudd, 2014).

Explicit or flagrant discrimination against Black teachers' entrance into the field is an obvious, pernicious culprit of opposition to employment, with Black educators regularly overlooked for teaching and school administrative positions in favor of their supposedly more capable white counterparts. While variations of this phenomenon have occurred for the past several decades, the particularly fiendish aspect of the current iteration is that research demonstrates a pressing need for Black educators, especially Black males (Bryan & Ford, 2014). Although Black educators are currently regular fixtures in school districts around the country, the roles inherited

and dutifully adopted by Black teachers are often variegated and complex beyond conventional measure.

The Problem

Ostensibly, Black educators are hired to teach students; however, in many instances an intriguing dynamic occurs when Black educators are hired in traditional school settings. Black teachers are inordinately tasked with addressing disciplinary challenges brought by Black students, nurturing psychological needs, and attending to physical requirements as they arise. For Black teachers, these duties are compounded with the responsibility of satisfactorily educating their students (Pabon, Anderson and Kharem, 2011). For perspective, it is important to note many Black educators are thrust into the various roles, such as surrogate parent and disciplinarian, because, often, these educators actually “see” Black students. According to Allen (2015), scores of white, middle-class teachers prefer to enclose themselves in a colorblind ideology, one that effectively prevents them from seeing color. Further, Allen asserts many white teachers resist discussion or examination of racial issues, choosing to adopt “colorblind” approaches to interacting with their students. Approaches such as this inflict unnecessary psychological harm on non-white students, as they are stripped of an honest acknowledgement of their identity (Allen, 2015).

Like Black Americans in general, Black teachers experience extreme cases of “twoness” or double consciousness (Lewis, 2014). In dealings with mainstream America, Black Americans must continuously contend with the challenges brought about by racial incongruity, challenges such as hiding true political leanings or perspectives on social issues (Lewis, 2014). Speaking specifically about Black male teachers, Lewis states, “I contend that Black male teachers enter the classroom and are conjoined with the prevailing stereotypes and propaganda that are disseminated globally about who they are— particularly in the United States” (pp. 12-13). Lewis continues, “This warring of identities—perception versus reality—is not only a factor in the school structure, but an everyday experience for Black males” (pp. 12-13).

The notion of double consciousness is compounded for Black teachers, who must successfully navigate social circumstances as well as serve varying functions for Black students. Black teachers contend with another pervasive phenomenon. They must deal with the struggle of having their identity crafted for them by whites. For Fordham and Ogbu (1986), part of this struggle was against *acting white*. For Fordham and Ogbu, one aspect of *acting white* is described as Black children consciously failing to achieve high levels of academic success for fear they will be shunned by their cultural group. By extension, Black professionals experience a converse circumstance. Black professionals must ingratiate themselves with whites and often think and behave as whites in order to achieve some measure of success.

For numerous teachers, the manner and decorum with which they conduct themselves has been prescribed by white America. In essence, this prescription of how to think behave forms a psychological oppression of Black teachers. For many Black teachers, a constant and intense struggle is one for self-definition (Richardson, 2015). Apart from implicitly being told they must serve as teacher, caregiver, disciplinarian, psychologist, and race educator, Black educators often seek to determine for themselves whether these roles fit into their idea(s) of being a teacher, as white teachers do not bear the same degree of burden with their students. The purpose of this article is to explore the inordinate emotional and psychological responsibilities experienced by Black teachers as they attempt to discharge their duties as educators.

Historical Background of Black Teachers

Prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, Black teachers were hailed as esteemed professionals and Black students were encouraged to become educators. According to Tilman (2004), “Black educators helped to build and operate schools, secure funding and other needed resources, worked with the Black community, and toiled as advocates for the education of Black children” (p. 282). Moreover, the aforementioned Black teachers were nurtured by and steeped in the ethos of their surrounding community. Siddle-Walker (2000) found that pre-Brown, the work of Black teachers was undergirded by the following five core principles: “Teachers should develop a relationship with the community; teachers should be committed to professional ideals; teachers should care about their students; teachers should relate the curriculum to students’ needs; teachers would receive community and school forms of support” (Siddle-Walker, 2000). The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision changed much of that, with Black teachers being roundly fired or otherwise displaced as primary educators of Black children (Irby, 2014). In one instance, all the Black teachers in a Florida town were fired in the aftermath of the Brown decision, while less qualified white teachers retained their positions (Orfield, 1969).

In the subsequent years following the *Brown* decision, large segments of Black children were integrated into white schools and Black schools often closed or simply removed Black personnel (Irby, 2014). Further, Irby contends the Brown decision brought about a de-racializing of education, changing narratives about important social considerations to neutral, diluted narratives regarding irrelevant societal issues. In agreement, Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that “*Brown* and the Civil Rights movement more broadly forced the country into public conversations about race, it also had an eventual effect of deracializing public discourse in ways that reduced overt expressions of racism” (p. 785). Bonilla-Silva further contends that the foregoing dynamic led to the color-blind movement currently employed today by white school personnel. Perfectly encapsulating the disadvantageous impact of the *Brown* decision, Hudson and Holmes (1994) offer the following representation:

In 1954, the year of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, approximately 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for the education of the nation’s two million African American public school students. A decade later, over 38,000 Black teachers and administrators had lost their positions in 17 southern and border states. (p. 388).

During the post-*Brown* years, Black educators were undoubtedly changed. While they once served as powerful, inspirational educators, the comparably fledgling number of current Black teachers now bear the responsibility of fulfilling numerous roles, perhaps more so than pre-*Brown* (Kluger, 2011). Post-*Brown*, Black communities around the country were summarily and surreptitiously disempowered because of these dismissals (Reardon & Owens, 2014).

Critical Race Theory and the Black Teacher Experience

Fundamentally, CRT offers conceptual tools with which to critique the institutional and systemic oppression specifically exacted upon non-white people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Consequently, CRT is contributive to analysis of the roles Black teachers play in contemporary society. CRT emphasizes core principles concerning racism embedded into the fabric of American society. At its nucleus, CRT asserts that racism is foundational bedrock upon which American society is structured, and it maintains racism is a constant societal feature (Bell, 1987). Racism, Bell argues, is a characteristic that preserves the interests and needs of the white people and the

paradigmatic infrastructure built by whites. For this writing, two tenets of CRT are critical to the analysis and evaluation of the Black teacher experience: Interest convergence and intersectionality.

Interest Convergence

Interest convergence is a tenet of CRT which argues that white people will support and promote issues put forth by Black people as long as two interests converge. CRT scholars contend that the interests of non-whites will only happen when there is a convergence of the interests of those in power (Sleeter, 2017). This article contends there are two main respects in which interest convergence applies to the experience of Black teachers: Black teachers as surrogate parents and Black teachers as disciplinarians.

Intersectionality

Davis (2008) defines intersectionality as the interplay of multiple identities and varied experiences of exclusion and subjection. Intersectionality presupposes that non-whites experience oppression because of race, in addition to association with other identities, such as, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

Current Responsibilities of Black Teachers

Former Secretary of Education, John King (2016), proclaimed how important a diverse teaching force can be for America's children, saying "...we need a teaching force that is as diverse as our students (p. 2)." He went on to say, "it's a real contributor to better outcomes in our schools, workplaces and communities" (p. 2). Along with this admission, former Secretary King also identified a critical issue that often plagues teachers of color. What former Secretary King referred to as the *invisible tax* on Black teachers is an ardent challenge facing many educators. According to King, the *invisible tax* "is imposed on them when they are the only or one of only a few non-white educators in the building" (p. 2). He continues by saying the tax is paid when these educators are expected to function as school disciplinarians based on an assumption they are better able to communicate with Black children with behavior issues. In the same article, Harry Preston, an African American physics teacher, explains the "invisible tax" from his view. "Every time I take my students to an engineering competition, or to speak with industry partners, or to tour colleges, I have to have the code-switching talk" (p. 4). Preston goes on to say, "That is a mental tax I personally pay as an educator (p. 4)." Accordingly, when Black educators such as Harry Preston must contend with a spate of issues confronting many Black students, white educators are largely freed from dealing with those challenges.

In some educational settings, school personnel presume Black teachers possess the desire and capacity to serve as role models for Black children. Relatedly, some scholars readily bristle at the accepted overestimation of the impact of Black teachers on all matters afflicting Black students. According to Pabon et al. (2013), presenting Black teachers as a "panacea to the Black male educational crises absolves the institution of public schooling in the U.S. of its role in creating and sustaining the conditions that foster the failure of poor students" (p. 12).

An added burden placed on Black teachers is the responsibility to serve as keepers of knowledge for all things concerning Black culture (Madsen & Mabokela, 2016). As the appointed spokespersons for Black America, Black teachers regularly spend inordinate time explaining to white people certain nuances of the Black experience (Madsen & Mabokela, 2016). Moreover, Black teachers are often, tacitly or verbally, encouraged and expected to serve on curriculum committees and participate in multicultural celebrations. Also frustrating for many Black teachers

is the notion that their colleagues are able to participate in just enough of the multicultural activities to be “politically correct,” while Black teachers must do noticeably more. In addition to the enumerated responsibilities, Black teachers have appreciably more duties.

Black Teachers as Disciplinarians

“I was the only Black teacher there, but I handled basically all the discipline problems” (Griffin & Tackie, 2016)

For untold numbers of American citizens, the imagery of an overpowering, domineering Black educator is not only rampant, but exceedingly accurate. According to Brockenbrough (2015), in general, Black teachers tend to mimic the style and manner of students’ families. Sometimes stern, sometimes rigid and harsh, Black teachers often demonstrate their affection for students through austerity, the same manner that has served to ward off threats to Black children. Brockenbrough contends it is this style which endears Black teachers to their students. Similarly, King (1993) found that Black teachers hold particular significance in the lives of Black pupils as Black teachers represent many roles, including that of primary disciplinarians for untold numbers of Black students. Naman (2009) maintains the state of many non-white communities place education as an “important survival mechanism and the principle means to advancement” (P. 122). Naman’s assertion is important because it places teachers at the fulcrum of the vehicle for advancement. In Black communities, Black teachers are crucial to that education.

Partly because of the hackneyed notion of Black teachers as stern disciplinarians, scores of teachers become characterized as authoritarian even when the label is misapplied. Brockenbrough offers the following representative excerpt regarding the disciplinarian stereotype: “For some Black men, that stern, real hard-core approach works, but you can’t force it. You can’t force something that’s not there. That rigid structure, drill sergeant approach is not me” (p. 15). Brockenbrough (2014) goes on to say that Black men teachers can easily be relegated to the role of enforcer for punitive school disciplinary systems, and that in some instances, Black teachers are regarded as the “big, bad, Black, scary teacher” whose blackness can be used to intimidate and overwhelm wayward Black children. Conversely, some teachers relish the challenge to demonstrate their prowess at managing unruly student behavior. “I didn’t have to get loud or do anything. It was just, I had a no-nonsense kind of attitude, where it’s a lot of nonverbal cues. ‘I expect more from you.’” (Deruy, 2016, p. 16).

The Black teacher as disciplinarian role is an added responsibility many teachers must endure, and while some actualize and endorse this charge, others forcefully rail against it. The Black teacher as disciplinarian trope is potentially injurious to the actual manner of Black educators.

Disciplinarians and Interest Convergence

According to Milner, Pearman, and McGee (2013), white people feel fearful that comprehensive, systemic changes will menace them in personal ways. Milner et al. go on to assert that when non-white people gain something, it is a threat to the maintenance of the status quo. Accordingly, when Black teachers are hired regarded as disciplinarians, the role invariably aligns with the aims of the white establishment, which would rather assign Black educators to deal with unruly Black children (Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017). As a result, Black teachers become charged with “fixing” Black children rather than educating them. This phenomenon serves as a singular and important benefit to the white establishment. Primarily, it relieves white teachers of having to

contend with the sometimes numerous emotional and behavioral challenges brought by Black students, challenges often brought about due to systematic racism (Vasquez & Altshuler, 2017).

While the Black teachers as disciplinarian trope seemingly benefits Black educators by extending employment opportunities, it actually serves the interests of white school personnel, because they are left to educating white students, thereby improving the overall academic capacity of white students. In short, the interests of both parties converge to produce a mutual, albeit unequal benefit. The overall advantage of this arrangement tilts heavily in favor of purveyors of the status quo, as scores of Black children are accommodated by the hiring of relatively few Black educators (Sleeter, 2017).

Disciplinarians and Intersectionality

Because Black educators face uncommon scrutiny and discrimination, they are often unfairly judged as inferior, incapable and discipline-centered (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). Widely spread and deleterious narratives concerning the nature of Black teachers are exacerbated with the additional adjectives affixed to their race. When joined with race considerations, socially inflammatory topics such as gender and sexual orientation can especially undermine effective Black educators, particularly women, who sometimes unnecessarily bear the label of “mean”, “strict” or other similarly pejorative descriptors (Milner, 2012).

Black men teachers also face challenges due to the intersection of their Blackness and maleness. According to Brockenbrough (2015), Black men teachers are challenged to be a particular way, usually perceptibly strong and “manly.” However, Brockenbrough notes, some Black men educators bring their lived experiences as Black male queer teachers into educational settings, only to be discriminated against and regarded as weak, unmanly and ill equipped to serve as role models for Black boys. This brand of discrimination is heightened by narratives about Black men as disciplinarians and the conventional perception of their physical, psychological and emotional virility (Brockenbrough, 2014).

Further, when Black teachers are called upon to corral and correct misbehaved Black students, arguably, it smacks of racist allusions to brutish, physical, vociferous figures, who menacingly lord over Black children (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). In addition to that racist model, the intellectual and pedagogical strengths of Black teachers are also greatly diminished by the depictions of them as disciplinarians. These teachers are often limited to *only* teaching Black students and are esteemed only for their agency to handle disciplinary problems (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). While Black teachers should be lauded for their ability to deftly manage classrooms, they should not be relegated to *only* dealing with behavior issues to the exclusion of refining their pedagogical prowess (Naman, 2009).

Additionally, the Black teachers who are inclined to focus their attention on behavior modification of students should be cognizant of their public perception. “Well, I don’t know if it’s a positive stereotype, but it’s a stereotype that all Black men can handle kids. You know, we’re aggressive. We’re the big, bad, Black, scary teacher” (Brockenbrough, 2014, p. 514). Because these stereotypes have persisted over protracted periods, it is crucial that Black teachers develop a keen awareness of their daily words and actions so as not to needlessly contribute to these generalizations.

Black Teachers as Surrogate Parents

Well, I don't think I can separate being a parent from my job as a teacher. Because I'm teaching my own children. I look at the children that I serve as an extension of me. I want them to go out and be their very best, because they represent me (Griffin & Tackie, 2016).

According to Lyons and Chelsey (2004), Black teachers have served as surrogate parents to Black students for generations. Lyons and Chelsey submit that white teachers are regularly underprepared to effectively teach Black students, therefore they are incapable of fulfilling a quasi-parental role. Correspondingly, Franklin (2009) argues Black teachers have historically bridged the home-school chasm by serving as surrogate parents to their Black students. Moreover, as surrogate parents to their Black students, Black teachers provide their pupils with the social skills and emotional guidance needed to successfully navigate through environments rife with institutional racism (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011). Regrettably, many white school personnel lack the skills and compassion necessary to connect home to school in Black communities (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011), which creates an urgency for Black teachers to cultivate positive, meaningful relationships with students.

Black Teachers as Surrogate Fathers

Black teachers, especially men, find themselves particularly sought after for surrogate familial relationships because so many Black children reside in female headed households. Snyder, McLaughlin and Findeis (2006) contend that as many as 75 percent of Black boys live in homes managed by females. With that reality, Black teachers often fill the father-figure role for students. Additionally, Black men teachers are capable of filling the father-figure role because they are typically the most demonized non-white group of Americans. As such, Yancey (2003) maintains that because Blacks were kidnapped from Africa and brought to the U.S., summarily subjugated by Whites, and are continually persecuted, Black students revel and delight in being around teachers who have surmounted immense difficulty. According to Yancey, this background provides an impetus for Black students' receptivity towards Black men as both teachers and surrogate fathers.

Black Women as Surrogate Mothers

Similarly, Black women teachers fill a parental void for scores of students. To aid in elucidating this relationship, Henry (1998) references the term *othermothering*, which signifies the "ethics of caring which Black women teachers impart to Black children as a part of their commitment to the survival and wholeness of the communities children" (p. 17). *Othermothering*, according to Henry, is the unspoken, undergirding philosophy Black women teachers employ when they nurture their Black students. In addition to imparting students with academic content knowledge, Black women teachers intuitively imbue Black students with the skills essential for survival and success in a patently racist society. Historically, *othermothering* originates from the relationships created and developed between slave women, whose children who were often left motherless primarily because of slave trading and acts of murder (Collins, 2000). When Black women teachers *mother* their students, they transmit considerable age-old experiences and wisdom. According to hooks (1994), Black women teachers bring with them gendered experiences that have traditionally been quieted and disenfranchised in educational circles. Often, it is this voice Black women teachers use to candidly convey important, sometimes life-saving messages to students. Because of these rich experiences with Black teachers, Black students develop improved political and educational awareness, in addition to increased social cachet.

Surrogate parents and Interest convergence

The roles fulfilled by Black teachers are myriad, but none is more essential than that of surrogate parent. This role is so significant that white school personnel around the country wisely eschew these functions and defer to seasoned, culturally proficient Black educators (Deruy, 2016). Meanwhile, the interests between proponents of the status quo and Black teachers converge when Black teachers often eagerly occupy the roles expected of them, and white school personnel are able to hire meager numbers of Black teachers for the express purpose of contending with wayward Black children in need of support. Ironically, Black educators often willingly provide attention and guidance to Black children in educational settings, yet there is little to no attention given to the fact these teachers regularly have their own children who require the same kinds of attention (Irby, 2014).

Surrogate parents and Intersectionality

Typical conceptualizations of racism and discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia, are insufficient to characterize the degree of prejudice faced by Black teachers. Instead, these individual oppressions commingle, creating an intersection of new forms of prejudice (Howard & Navarro, 2016). Further, the Black teacher as surrogate parent trope is a familiar one that harkens back to earlier times. In times past, Black educators served as caretaker and educator for children other than their own, without much complaint. Currently, the existing narrative of Black teachers as surrogate parents includes the racist implication that Blacks are willing and natural caregivers of other people's children (Henry, 1998). While there is basis to the idea that Black teachers are exceedingly capable as educators of Black children, the intersection between Black people and teachers gives power to the somewhat racist implication that Black people can work indefatigably, provide for and nurture others, and are to be continuously worked in order to prove their value. Particularly for Black women, the idea that the intersection of those two qualities imbues teachers with innate capacity to juggle these multifaceted functions is an insensitive and racist social construction.

Implications

Initially, I began examining the numerous roles of Black teachers in the school setting and briefly identified the stated purpose of Black educators in the field of education. Using Critical Race theory, I identified some of the impediments to the seamless integration of Black teachers into the educational fold. In truth, education policy makers have the ability to disrupt some of the continuous problems that plague Black teachers. More than anything, an understanding of the inordinately prodigious set of responsibilities charged to Black teachers and hiring additional staff to accommodate some of these roles would be an impressive start.

Under CRT, the idea of interest convergence gives school leaders and policy makers fodder for discussion concerning the reasons actions are taken and whom those actions benefit. With this information, educational policy makers can begin to make informed decisions that reflect the best academic and social emotions needs of students, while also professionally developing all staff members in best practices in cultural proficiency.

Respecting intersectionality, the information provided offers readers a chance to influence deliberate, clear policies and practices regarding the superimpositions on Black teachers and the various intersecting permutations. Armed with the information supplied and analyzed here,

meaningful conversations are needed to reverse the racist practices directed toward Black educators.

Conclusion

Black teachers have always served as social change agents. Dating back generations, Black teachers have been integral in the development and efflorescence of their communities, from both educational and social perspectives. Wholesale and impacting changes to the profession, namely *Brown v. Board of Education*, brought about unforeseeable dynamics to both education and Black communities around the United States. Because of those changes, Black teachers in contemporary society are tasked with taking on greater responsibility than their counterparts, often serving as disciplinarians and surrogate parents in the educational setting. With these responsibilities, many Black teachers opt to leave the profession in favor of less emotionally taxing work.

According to various studies, the academic and social prospects of Black students largely rests on the efforts of strong, effective Black teachers, teachers who have artfully navigated the social and political terrain and gained some measure of success. The social gymnastics Black teachers undergo can serve as a prescription for young Black people, providing a list of pratfalls to avoid and the best pathway to academic and social success. Although the challenges faced by Black teachers are considerable, so much so that many leave the profession, the potency of their experience is invaluable to the enhancement of subsequent generations of Black students. Although this burden on Black teachers is immense, it is essential, as there is a shortage of capable, willing candidates to fulfill these roles.

In order to continually gain understanding of this complex phenomenon, additional studies are required. Future studies should address the degree to which Black teachers feel stress and frustration in their various roles. Subsequent research could also examine the male equivalent of *othermothering* to gain greater appreciation for the symbiotic interaction between Black teachers and students.

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