Race, culture and agency: Examining the ideologies and practices of U.S. teachers of Black male students

Quaylan Allen

Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, CA 92866, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher ideologies of Black male students can be inconsistent and contradictory.
- Teachers use structural and cultural impediments to describe Black male schooling.
- Teacher agency includes resistance to school processes on behalf of Black males.
- Teachers suspend judgment of, advocate for, and challenge Black male students.
- Teacher resistance to school hegemony creates opportunities for Black males.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers of Black male students in a United States secondary school setting. Qualitative methods were used to document teachers' ideologies of and practices with their Black male students. In general, teachers drew upon competing structural and cultural explanations of Black male social and academic outcomes, while also engaging in practices that contested school barriers for Black males. Teacher beliefs about and practices with their Black male students were inconsistent in many ways, yet their agency on behalf of Black males might be understood as essential to Black male educational progress.

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1. Introduction

A review of the occupational, social, and educational outcomes for Black men paints a picture of racial stratification in American society. Black men experience high unemployment rates (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013; Wilkinson, 1999), vast income inequalities compared to their White male counterparts regardless of class standing (Hoffman, Llagas, & Snyder, 2003), and are differentially treated in the judicial system (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011; Mustard, 2001). Reports on Black male educational outcomes are similarly disconcerting and may be related to some of the aforementioned social outcomes (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001; Noguera, 2003b). Although there is evidence of improvement in the educational progress of Black males (Harper, 2012; McGee &

Martin, 2011; Wright, 2011), it is clear that more can be done to support them in the educational system.

Schools are powerful institutions for the maintenance of class, racial, and gender stratification. Through school resegregation, academic and ability tracking, differential learning expectations, and race-gendered discipline disparities, schools participate in the process of social and cultural reproduction for Black males. At their worst, schools are the "pump" in the school-to-prison pipeline for many Black boys (Noguera, 2003a). However, social reproduction through school cannot occur without the contribution of institutional agents such as teachers (Tyson, 2003). Thus, an examination of the ecology of Black male schooling should consider the role that teachers play as one of many important agents in the educational outcomes of Black boys.

In this article, I examine the ideologies and practices of teachers of Black males in a United States (U.S.) school context. In particular, I highlight the ways in which teachers think and talk about their

Black male students using structural and cultural explanations of Black male educational and social outcomes. I also bring attention to teacher practices, and how teachers enact agency in ways that contest the structural impediments Black males face in school. The findings of this study are contextualized within a particular U.S. city but might also be relevant to other domestic and international communities where racialized or indigenous populations are marginalized in school.

2. Critical theories of Black male schooling

Critical theories examining schooling have generally described schools as contested locations of social and cultural reproduction (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983a; McLaren, 2003). By this I mean that they are institutions controlled by dominant groups designed to meet the needs of a capitalist society by reproducing a differentiated workforce and an economically stratified society (Anyon, 1980, 1981; Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Gatto, 1992). Furthermore, as ideological institutions of the state, schools reproduce dominant cultural knowledge, literacies, and norms (Althusser, 1971; Bourdieu, 1977; Freire, 1970). In other words, schools contribute to the raced, classed, and gendered stratification of society and the reproduction of White middle-class ideology.

For instance, Black males encounter structural barriers of race and class when they attend resegregated schools, or are segregated within school via ability tracking (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Orfield & Lee, 2007). Both neighborhood segregation and within-school segregation produce access to differential school knowledge as the curriculum and instructional styles differ by the racial and economic makeup of the school (Anyon, 1981; Gatto, 1992; Oakes, 2005). Furthermore, the race-gendered discipline disparities Black males experience unnecessarily exposes them to the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2012; Noguera, 2003a).

In addition to social role differentiation and stratification, schools are expected to transmit "mainstream" White middle-class cultural knowledge and norms as a political act of assimilation, control, and constructing a national identity (Dreeben, 1987; Hirsch, 1987; Parsons, 1959). As socializing institutions, schools emphasize particular forms of cultural capital, which Bourdieu (1977, 1990) suggests reflects the knowledge, dispositions, orientations, goods, and credentials unique to dominant social groups. These forms of capital are privileged within the context of school and are often used for social and cultural exclusion. Such cultural capital may include formal education and degree attainment, access to personal libraries, a large vocabulary, participation in cultural outings (such as museums and vacations), and greater access to technology. Cultural capital also may include certain forms of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), which are deep-seated cultural dispositions, such as particular educational and occupational expectations, that may result from the concerted cultivation of parents (Dumais, 2002; Lareau, 2003).

Theoretically, members of the dominant groups already possessing such capital will experience success in school and, subsequently, acquire economic capital and continued social dominance. However, by privileging White middle-class ideology, school institutions undermine the ideology, funds of knowledge, and cultural wealth of non-dominant cultures, which in many cases puts school and home culture at odds (Milner IV, 2013; Moll & Gonzalez, 1997; Yosso, 2006). As such, communities of students who do not have access to knowledge of the dominant ideology or are unwilling to adopt it may experience dissonance in school (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 2008; Willis, 1977). Schools writ large are powerful institutions in the reproduction of social and cultural inequalities.

2.1. Teacher ideologies and Black male schooling

Teachers play an important role in the education of Black males (Howard, 2008; Milner IV, 2007), and as agents of a state apparatus, teachers may perpetuate dominant ideology in particular ways. For example, researchers have examined how teachers, who are predominantly White, middle class, and female (Coopersmith, 2009), rely on White middle-class ideology to inform their practices (Ferguson, 2005; Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges, & Jennings, 2010). In this way, many teachers conceive of and engage in practices with their Black male students that greatly influence the students' educational prospects.

For example, many White educators resist any discussion or analysis of racial issues, choosing instead to adopt "colorblind" approaches to viewing their students (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Milner IV, 2008a; Walton et al., 2014). This might include claiming to not see or be influenced by the racial makeup of their students, or assuming school polices are racially neutral (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Solorzano, 1997). In adopting "colorblind" approaches, White teachers exonerate themselves in the maintenance of racial hegemony, and fail to understand how social and institutional racism pervade the lives of students of color both inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, by avoiding critical examinations of racism, many educators rely on their own understandings of students of color, which in many cases reflect dominant stereotypical and deficit views of culture (Delpit, 1995; Solorzano, 1997).

For instance, many teachers rely on normative assumptions regarding the intellectual capacities of Black males and thus lower their academic expectations of their Black male students. As a result, Black boys regularly find themselves tracked into lower ability, remedial, or special education programs and out of higher ability or gifted education programs (Ford, Harris III, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Oakes, 2005). Similarly, when teachers rely on White normative assumptions of Black male deviancy, they frequently misinterpret the behaviors of Black males and are catalysts in the differential treatment in discipline and the overrepresentation of Black boys in school suspensions and expulsions (Aud, Fox, & Kewal Ramani, 2010; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The relationship between White teachers and Black boys in the U.S. draws comparison to the experiences of communities in different countries. Black and indigenous communities in the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia attend schools with White teachers holding similar deficit views. Teachers of these students often hold low academic expectations, and boys of color are disproportionately disciplined (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Bodkin-Andrews, Denson, & Bansel, 2013; Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawî, 2005; Solomon, 1992; Strand, 2012). The parallels of these particular experiences draw attention to the varying ways White ideological hegemony impedes the educational progress for boys of color across geographical and social contexts.

2.2. Teacher agency

Though schools may be sites of racial, economic, and ideological domination, they are inevitably contested sites where individuals and collective groups enact agency in resisting the structural and cultural dominance of schooling. Most research on this type of school resistance has focused on student agency. In particular, research on student agency has examined the ways youth come to understand schooling as a reproducer of inequalities and engage in acts of resistance against school expectations and process (Aggleton, 1987; MacLeod, 1987; Ogbu, 2008; Solomon, 1992). For instance, students might consciously resist the temporal or spatial arrangements of school processes, or reject the bourgeois