

Schooling at the Liminal: Black Girls and Special Education

Evans-Winters shares narratives demonstrating how Black girls can be misidentified as in need of special education services

liminality (lim-uh-nal-i-tee)

--noun *Anthropology*.

1. the transitional period or phase of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc.

<Latin *līmin-* (stem of *līmen*)
threshold + -al¹+ -ity (Dictionary.com, 2016)

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the utility of intersectionality as a conceptual framework in special education discourse. More specifically, it is posited that intersectionality is necessary for understanding the experiences of Black girls in schools. In the discussion below, I use Black feminism and critical race theory as the theoretical framework, and use narratives derived from a qualitative study with

undergraduate college students to demonstrate how Black girls are often *misidentified* for special education services. The shared narratives reveal how Black girls from lower-income and working class families may be at higher risk of being identified as learning disabled and/or as having a behavioral or emotional disability compared to their middle class and White peers. Due to racial and gender discrimination in schools, many Black girls experience schooling in a state of liminality. The article has implications for special education, teacher education development, and social work.

Introduction

Public schools are more racially and economically segregated than they were prior to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and the majority of Black and Latino students attend predominantly minority schools,

whereas the majority of White students are segregated in majority White schools (Orfield et al., 2012). With this knowledge in mind, public education in the U.S. is confronted with the following dilemmas: (a) the teaching profession has inherited in-service and pre-service teachers who have little experience teaching with racial/ethnic minority students; and (b) most of these teachers hold limited and distorted images of people of color, because (c) they have lived very racially isolated and monocultural existences.

Cultural illiteracy and societal stereotypes of racial/ethnic minority children may influence teachers' decisions on who to refer to special education. As indicated below, Black children and children from other minority groups are overrepresented (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (UCR), 2007). Yet, research suggests that Black children and other minority children are least likely to be referred for gifted education (Ford, 2013a/c). For example, from 1998 to 2007, only 4% of all 6- to 21-year-olds were identified as having a specific learning disability; 7% of American Indians/Alaska Natives in this age group had this type of disability, compared with 5% of Blacks and Hispanics, 3% of Whites, and 2% of Asians/Pacific Islanders (NCES, 2010).

Furthermore, 2% of Black 6- to 21-year-olds were identified as having mental

retardation, while 1% or less of 6- to 21-year olds in other racial/ethnic groups had this disability (NCES, 2010). Conversely, the underrepresentation of Black students in gifted education is a national inequity issue present in most school districts. The Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC, 2012) report suggests that Black students have been underrepresented in gifted programs by almost 50% (Ford, 2013b). There is a "race problem" in the special education system (Beratan, 2008; Blanchett, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Here it is appropriate to ask: Is there a race and gender problem in the special education identification, referral, and placement process?

Even though girls may be under referred for special education and underrepresented in special education programs for students with disabilities (Oswald, 2003; Arms, Bicket & Graf, 2008), little is known about Black girls' experiences within the special education system. Unfortunately, little research speaks to the intersection of race and gender in the special education referral and placement process. Without an intersectional perspective Black girls may be at risk of being over referred for special education services or misidentified as having a specific disability (i.e., a learning disability, emotional or behavioral disability, and/or mental retardation).

An analysis that centers race, gender, and class in special education discourse is important because girls of African descent experience racism, sexism, and classism simultaneously in schooling (Evans-Winters, 2011). Drawing from a Critical Race Theory (CRT) and CRT in education framework, it is postulated that racism and race-based gender discrimination are normal and deeply entrenched in the U.S. schooling system (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Consequently, racism and class bias inevitably affects who is referred and identified as in need of special education placement.

Critical Race Feminism in Education

Critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism are used to demonstrate that Whiteness and class bias tend to put teachers at-risk of over-identifying and/or overlooking Black girls in need of adequate gender and culturally-responsive special education services. Similarly, critical race feminism (CRF) is utilized to show how the intersections of race, class, and gender leave Black girls invisible, and simultaneously, hypervisible in classrooms. For nearly two decades, educational scholars have emphasized the utility of critical race theory's application to education theory, policy, and praxis (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Howard, 2010; Lynn & Dixson, 2013). CRT has four

tenets that have been purported to inform education:

1. CRT unequivocally claims that race and racism are central, endemic, permanent and fundamental in defining and explaining how U.S. society functions;
2. CRT challenges dominant ideologies and claims of race neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness and equal opportunity;
3. the principles of CRT are activist in nature and propagates a commitment to social justice;
4. CRT centers the experiences and voices of the marginalized and oppressed; and (Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

Critical race theory in education unequivocally posits that racism is deeply embedded in education practices, policies, and curriculum. In acknowledging that racism is a reality in U.S. schooling, CRT scholars challenge the innocence of teachers and school practices that claim to “not see color”. In truth, CRT as a methodology boldly centers race at the center of analysis to give voice to the interpretations, insights, and lived experiences of the oppressed and marginalized in schools and educational contexts. Based on these shared stories, CRT

scholars in education suggest theory, policies and practices that serve to challenge White supremacy and foster school resilience.

Of importance to this article and the topic of special education, is that CRT in education draws from sociology, legal theory, cultural studies, psychology and other social sciences. In this article, it is unabashedly proclaimed that taking an interdisciplinary approach is of import at a time when educational thought is too often ahistorical (i.e. based on White middle class and male experiences), monocultural (i.e. based on the values, beliefs, norms, etc. of White middle class culture) and atheoretical (i.e. either absent of theory and/or embedded in Eurocentric Western perspectives of reality). In agreement with Bell (1995) and CRT, most educational theory inevitably “secure, advance, or at least not harm” (p. 22) the state of affairs for Whites people. Critical race theory in special education and intersectional frameworks challenges the security, advancement, and comfortability of Whiteness in the special education referral and identification process. The subsequent section of this paper presents an outline of the tenets of critical race feminism as an extension of critical race theory. Critical race feminism in education is the most useful framework for understanding the experiences of Black girls in schools.

Critical race feminism (CRF) is used in an analysis of special education and Black girl students to examine the complex and subtle gendered, racialized, and classed exchanges occurring in schools. To begin with, CRF focuses on the lives of women of color. Black girls and women confront multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of male patriarchy and White racial domination. Furthermore, CRF advocates for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression (Austin, 1989; Crenshaw 1995; Wing 2003).

As articulated by Crenshaw (1995), “Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always paralleled to experiences of White women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms,” (p. 360). In teacher professional development there is a need for theoretical frameworks that recognize Black women’s and girls’ ways of knowing to inform educational thought and practices. Critical race feminism takes an unapologetic examination of the intersection of race, class and gender in the legal sphere and the broad experiences of women and girls of color. In this article, critical race feminism in education is introduced to special education as a framework and methodology.

CRF proclaims: women of color experiences are similar to, but different from, the experiences of men of color and those of White women; and women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression. Additionally, CRF presents the multiple identities and consciousness of women of color (i.e., anti-essentialist); thus, CRF serves to represent the multi-perspectives of women of color.

CRF in education (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010) maintains that female students of color's stories and narratives are essential to contextualize overt and covert acts of gender and racial aggression. Moreover, CRF calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression in schools and society. CRF in education has the potential to inform research on the special education referral and placement process. CRF in education avers that Black girls' schooling experiences are unique from White girls and Black boys in educational contexts, because Black girls cope with and resist racism, sexism and classism in their families, school, and communities (Evans-Winters, 2011). The narratives below exemplify Black girls' perceptions of the role of race, class,

and gender in the special education identification and referral process.

Qualitatively Speaking:

A Note on Methodology

The narratives below are excerpts from a larger study with Black female undergraduate students attending a university in the Midwestern part of the U.S. The participants in the original study identified as African American or Black and were from diverse economical and geographical locations. The original 25 participants were randomly recruited from an empowerment program for Black women undergraduates. Eighteen were eventually interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. In the tradition of Black feminist qualitative research (Dillard, 2000; McClaurin, 2001; Evans-Winters & Love, 2015), interviews were followed up with informal conversations and observations of the participants in different contexts. Besides mentoring many participants, stories and information were gathered via interview notes, journal entries, poems, videos, and social media. Identifying information was changed to protect the anonymity of participants. The narratives of those young women who mentioned in their narratives that at some point in their academic careers

they had a memorable experience related to the special education process are highlighted.

Having Our Say: Dominique's Story

Dominique is from a single-parent home, and raised by her mother, along with her three siblings. During her childhood, she lived and was schooled in low-income communities, including public housing. She discussed the challenges of moving around a lot as a child as well as having a volatile and inconsistent relationship with her biological father as a child. In the early school years, Dominique reportedly had all Black female teachers, but by middle school, she was moved to a charter school after her neighborhood school closed. "The school focused on math, technology, and college; and stuff like that," described Dominique.

At her charter school, there were only White female teachers. According to Dominique, it was at the new school when she began to experience problems at school. Dominique explained about her new school, "They always called me out in class for talking too much." Also, she suggested that most teachers commented on her behavior, such as "talking when I wasn't suppose to be talking" and insubordination. In her words, "They stayed calling my momma over stupid stuff." Dominique felt like this had more to do with her not fitting traditional White women

notions of feminine behavior and looks. Below, Dominique explains how teachers perceived her aesthetics:

My mama was poor. She can't afford to keep gettin' me new clothes and stuff. Sometimes I did go to school dirty or smelly [laughing]. I think they didn't like me for that. They wanted me to talk White and stuff. They wanted me to be a good White girl. I wasn't raised like that. I'm Black. My mama taught me to say what I gotta say or shoo.

Dominique revealed that soon enough her grades dropped significantly and she became labeled as a problem student who was not interested in learning. "How I go from being an A student to a C, D, F student?", Dominique questioned aloud. In African American vernacular she proclaimed, "They said I was special, but I knew I was smart." In the first year at the charter school, she was suspended several times, before moving to a different neighborhood and switching schools. At the neighborhood school, with predominantly Black teachers, she recalled that she was not a "problem student", but she did feel less challenged academically. "It was more than just about math and science. We did more fun stuff. They cared about us and

didn't play." At her new school, she became an A and B student again.

Having Our Say: Toni's Story

Toni attended private schools in middle and high school in the suburbs of a large city. Although the suburb where she lived was racially and economically mixed, the public school district and neighborhood where she resided were predominantly Black. In Toni's words, "Them teachers weren't ready for us. Nobody wanted us there; like we was bringing the school down." During the interview, Toni reminisced about not having Black teachers until she enrolled in college. I was the first Black professor she ever met. She recalls, "All the teachers were White. I've never had a Black teacher."

Being reared by her mother and father, Toni shared that she has always been confident in her academic abilities. "My mom and dad always preached to me and my little brothers that school was important, and for us to make something of ourselves." Toni was, and still is (in my opinion), a quiet and confident student. "I liked learning. I wasn't one of those students that learned easily, but I worked hard to get good grades." As a college student, she aspires to become a teacher. As she recalls, "around the fourth or fifth grade, they wanted to test me for special ed." However, Toni's father believed the

teachers at her suburban school were racist and that was the reason they wanted to test her for special education.

Furthermore, Toni indicated that her father believed that the White teachers wanted to keep the classrooms segregated. He also believed, according to Toni, that the White teachers did not respect her culture; thus, they could not recognize her intelligence. It is worthwhile to mention that her father at that time was affiliated with a Black religious group known for its conservative Black national politics. Ironically, her father pulled her out of a public school and put her in all girls' private Catholic schools. In middle and high school, Toni was in the minority, but felt validated as a girl. "At St. Thomas, there was some racism but race was not a problem. There was only a few other Black kids and me. But, I liked that we was sent the message that girls can do anything." In Toni's case positive gender messages were as important in her student identity as racialized messages about students' self-worth.

Schooling at the Liminal

On the surface, it is not apparent how the excerpts above directly relate to exceptionality and special education. However, at second glance, coupled with an intersectional lens, it becomes more apparent

that many academically resilient Black girls experience schooling at the liminal of gifted and learning dis(Abled). Meaning that many Black girls in U.S. public schools find themselves being schooled and labeled at the threshold as either high academic achievers or poor learners. Keeping in mind that the gifted education referral process and special education referral process have both been found to be very subjective, it is difficult for researchers and social justice educators to locate Black girls within gifted education or the special education discourse (Ford, 2013b).

However, it can be concluded that many Black girls, like the young women above, can go their entire academic careers not quite good enough for the label of gifted, yet, seemingly a perfect fit for the special education referral process. Elsewhere, the under identification of Black girls for gifted education placement is discussed (Evans-Winters, 2014); therefore, here attention is given to the potential of misidentification of Black girls in need of special education placement. Moreover, attention is given to the observation that it appears to be commonplace for high achieving Black girls at some point in their academic career to be referred for evaluation for special education placement. Because the Black girls' mentioned above were never actually placed in special education programs, this article

will only address the potential for misidentification. This potential is what leaves many Black girls' experience with schooling at the liminal of high achieving and learning disabled.

A simple definition of liminal means "of, relating to, or situated at the limen" (dictionary.com, 2016). Limen refers to any place or point of entering or beginning, such as the beginning of middle school, high school, or adolescence. Ironically, both participants mentioned that special education discussions began as they were entering middle school and coming in contact for the first time with White teachers. Psychologically speaking, limen might also refer to the point at which a stimulus is of sufficient intensity to begin to produce an effect (e.g. a stimulus that causes pain or a stimulus that raises one's consciousness).

Borrowing this definition of liminal, it appears that *the liminal* space for many Black girls, like the Black girls referenced above: is the point between thinking of herself as a typical high-achieving student and the thought of herself being placed in a special education program. At that moment in which a teacher informs her that she is an "abnormal student," her identity as a student begins to shift, while simultaneously she begins to develop a consciousness of resistance.

For instance, Dominique's comment, "They said I was special, but I knew I was smart," is indicative of her being at that liminal space of thinking of herself as intelligent and capable of learning, but still cognizant of how White adult teachers viewed her as a student and human being. Dominique's statement reasserts her voice and subjectivity when she exclaims what she knows about herself, while rejecting others' interpretations of her student identity and humanity. I believe this interpretation of (re)claiming her humanity is important, for Dominique appeared to be aware of how White teachers evaluated her more on her social class status (e.g. her attire, single parent home, etc.) and gender aesthetics (e.g. how much she spoke, assertiveness, behavior, etc.) than her academic abilities.

Similarly, Toni's statements, "I liked learning. I wasn't one of those students that learned easily, but I worked hard to get good grades" and "around the fourth or fifth grade, they wanted to test me for special ed" are examples of Toni's attempts to make sense of that dark space between being confident of her ability to learn (as a determined student) and viewing herself from the perspective of the other as not the ideal learner. The idea of the "ideal learner" in the identification of special education referral is important, because as Toni mentioned in her above

excerpt, "Them teachers weren't ready for us. Nobody wanted us there; like we was bringing the school down." Interestingly enough, Dominique, like Toni, questioned the innocence of the special education referral. The young women associated a special education screening or referral as a sign of racism as opposed to an objective assessment of a students' need for additional services (e.g. curriculum, instruction, etc.).

As outlined in the definition of liminal as a psychological (or physiological) concept, present is a stimulus and response. For Dominique and Toni, the stimulus in the shared stories is the teacher's referral for a special education evaluation and the response is them questioning the teacher's motives, not their own academic abilities or dispositions. Although it is not clear from their narratives whether an actual special education referral took place, the mere mention of a special education placement or learning disability threatened the girls' self concept as a student. For me, this observation of special education being a real or perceived threat to a Black girl's scholar identity (Ford, 2013a) is significant when looking at how experiencing schooling in the liminality of the special education process may actually place Black girls at-higher risk of psychological or physical withdrawal from school.

In Dominique's case, she admits that her behavior became more aggressive and non-compliant after the transfer to a new middle school. Of course, due to the myriad outside-of-school factors (i.e. school closings, family conflict, neighborhood violence, etc.) she faced, her change in behavior could be influenced by those outside-of-school factors as well as attitudes and practices in the school environment. In Toni's case, her parents first psychologically withdrew (i.e. as represented in their profoundly expressed distrust of the teachers at the school) their support of the school, and then eventually physically withdrew her from the neighborhood school and public school system altogether.

On the other hand, all stimuli do not cause a negative psychological response. Worth noting, for the purposes of this article, is that, for Dominique and Toni, being schooled in the liminality actually facilitated a critical consciousness about the realities of racial bias, gender discrimination, and classism in school contexts. Interestingly enough, in their mind, the impetus for them being labeled as in need of special education services was White teachers. For example, Dominique asserted, "They wanted me to talk White and stuff. They wanted me to be a good White girl. I wasn't raised like that. I'm Black. My mama taught me to say what I gotta say or shoo..." Her words suggest that teachers

expect students to conform to White middle class norms and expectations, and if students like her did not comply, they were labeled and potentially placed into special education. For Dominique, resisting Whiteness (Crenshaw, 1997) became a threat that could lead her into special education placement.

Similarly, Toni described that her parents consistently and audaciously asserted that "White teachers wanted to keep the classrooms segregated" and "White teachers did not respect her culture" or "recognize her intelligence". Thus, for some Black girls, schooling in the liminal is sparked by White teachers (the stimulus), which potentially can foster a critical consciousness (response) as well as skepticism about the schooling process (response). Oxy-moronic-ally, it appears that many Black girls are vulnerable in the special education identification and referral process, but many are also resilient and demonstrate forms of resistance (psychological and physical) to teacher's perceptions of their academic abilities. Toni's parents were protector factors in her schooling, and later, her girl-centered education as well; and both Dominique's mother and Black teachers acted as protective factors in her educational development. These protective factors helped both students to become educationally resilient.

Consequently, even though liminality in anthropological academic discourse (Turner, 1969 & Thomassen, 2009) refers to the transitional period of a rite of passage, during which the participant lacks social status or rank, remains anonymous, shows obedience and humility, and follows prescribed forms of conduct, dress, etc.; however, at second glance, it appears that many Black girls, like the two young women highlighted here, resist the liminality of what appears to be to them drenched in White people's perception of what a good student looks like and how she behaves. In short, until teacher preparation programs and teachers themselves confront racism, sexism and classism in schools and society many Black girls and their families will never cross the threshold into special education services, or even consider the possibilities of special education services.

Conclusion

This article began the discussion on the usefulness of intersectional frameworks for understanding the schooling experiences of Black female students. Critical race theory and critical race feminism allows for an analysis of the role that racism, sexism, and classism plays on teachers perceptions and interactions with Black girls. Based on the literature and the shared stories of high

academic achieving young Black women, it is concluded that Black girls are at higher risk of being misidentified as in need of special education services and wallow in the liminal space of "potentially in need of special education placement" throughout their academic careers

Therefore, this article calls for more research on the experiences of Black girls with the special education referral process. At this time, not much is known about how Black girls are identified, referred, and experience special education (likewise gifted education) placement.

As indicated in the aforementioned study, there is a need for a more transparent gender and culturally-responsive referral special education process. Currently, it is difficult to identify potentially twice exceptional students, like the young women presented here, because they are simultaneously identified as high achievers and potentially dis(abled). Unfortunately, racism and classism in education leave many families and students distrustful of the intentions of teachers and school administrators. Also, most teachers lack the cultural competencies and cultural literacy to comprehend the stressors and supports that many Black girls draw upon to foster academic resilience (Evans-Winters, 2011).

Whiteness, White middle class values, and Eurocentric Western notions of femininity place Black girls at high-risk of being overly identified as in need of special education interventions, and under identified in referrals for gifted education (Evans-Winters, 2014). Intersectional theoretical frameworks in special education research, the referral process, and teaching practices can better help us meet the academic needs of all Black female students. In sum, intersectional frameworks and perspectives will help to unpack, expose, and actively resist Black girls continual schooling in the liminal space of potentially disabled.

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