

## Appreciating the Impact of *Intersectionality* in Education Settings Using the Example of Females of Color

*Intersectionality refers to the simultaneous experience of categorical and hierarchical classifications including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. It also refers to the fact that what are often perceived as disparate forms of oppression, like racism, classism, sexism, and xenophobia, are actually mutually dependent and intersecting in nature, and together they compose a unified system of oppression. Thus, the privileges we enjoy and the discrimination we face, are typically facilitated by our unique positioning in society as determined by these classifiers.*

*About Education*

[http://sociology.about.com/od/I\\_Index/fl/Intersectionality.htm](http://sociology.about.com/od/I_Index/fl/Intersectionality.htm)

*The unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity. . . . The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity; therefore it cannot unfold in the antagonistic relations between oppressors and oppressed. No one can be authentically human while he [or she] prevents others from being so.*

Paulo Freire

*I do not think oppression only has to do with the colors of our skin, it has a lot do with age as well. Technically, all youth are oppressed by adults, especially in grade school.*

Kendra Irwin

Social and political theories recognize that institutionalized biases result in subgroup oppressions and power being distributed in an unfair and inequitable manner (e.g., DeFrancisco et al., 2013) (Elliot, 2014). The concept of intersectionality recognizes the interconnection among various types of institutionalized biases that may be experienced simultaneously. Such biases are associated with various forms of privilege and oppression. With specific respect to oppression, Young (1990) has suggested a framework for assessing intersecting dimensions focusing on exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

To highlight the concept of intersectionality, this brief resource (1) underscores the impact on “females of color” in schools and (2) offers some suggestions for combating the problem.

### Demographics

In the U.S., females of color comprise 36.3 percent of the female population, and 18 percent of the entire population. As the U.S. becomes more diverse, they are a growing demographic (Kerby, 2012). However, this subgroup is largely underrepresented in almost all domains of modern life. Being at the intersection of two of the most underprivileged subgroups in society, the double jeopardy of being both female and ethnic minority produces disproportionate negative school outcomes. And the problem is exacerbated for low income families, of whom more than half are black and Latina females (Kerby, 2012).

### About Racism and Sexism

Two intersecting social-cultural structural oppressions that impact females of color most directly are racism and sexism. These factors are associated with long-standing discrimination and violence.

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\*The material in this document reflects work done by Yibing Yang as part of his involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.

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Racism has been defined as beliefs that racial categorization identifies subgroups of people who, by birth and nature, are superior or inferior to others. Such beliefs are manifested as bias, prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism directed against others of a different race. On an institutional level, it results in those in power oppressing and exploiting subgroups based on skin color, ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and so forth (Rothenberg, 2004). Sexism is prejudice or discrimination based on a person's sex or gender, stemming from and reinforced by beliefs that male sex and gender is superior to others (Doob, 2013).

It should be clear that factors such as one's socio-economic, immigrant, disability, and LGBTQ status and age and physical appearance also are intersections that add complications. For example, with respect to gender, transfemales of color are frequent targets of oppression not only because of their racial and female categorization, but because they adopt "masculine" traits, which tend to further stigmatize women in the U.S. (Goff et al., 2008).

Females of color are underrepresented or misrepresented in almost every social arena (Kerby, 2012). Both gender and racial biases continue to permeate most education institutions in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> For instance, gendered and racial stereotypes about learning and leadership deficiencies often block females of color from having equity of opportunity, generally limit their social and economic mobility, and negatively impact their emotional and physical health (Clauset, Arbesman, & Larremore, 2015). A vicious cycle is perpetuated because young females of color see few role models in prominent positions and, thus, are less likely to believe that they are capable of success at school and beyond.

*The oppression/anti-oppression continuum captures the spectrum of both material and non-material consequences that accrue to individuals or groups based on perceived or actual identity. Also related is the power/privilege continuum. The mechanisms of oppression are both covertly and overtly implemented. Conscious and unconscious attitudes and behaviors contribute to the pervasiveness of oppression. The power/privilege continuum adds depth to the assessment and recognizes that individuals are differently located and situated, in part based upon constructions of their place in society and their described identity/identities. The power/privilege dynamic questions the supposition that we are all created equal and explicitly recognizes that race/ethnicity, gender, sex, gender expression, sexual orientation, national origin, ability/disability, and class provide a wide array of both advantages and disadvantages for group membership and access to resources and power. Anti-oppression work is the conscious enactment of personal and political strategies to confront and eradicate the consequences of oppression along the dimensions of the power/privilege continuum.*

Council on Social Work Education

## Racism and Sexism in Education

"The danger of making assumptions is ever lurking. Hatt-Echeverria and Urrieta (2003) discussed the compartmentalization of oppression, institutionalized in schools and society with labels and stereotypes abounding. Even within the context of social class and racial marginalization, it is vital for the classroom teacher to look beyond stereotypes, without making assumptions, to appreciate each student before her or him for the individual they are."

"... It is important to see through the systemically oppressive categories that have been put in place, and the assumptions they create and support. Recognizing each student as an individual is the first step in rising above the paradigms created by such labeling. A teacher who views his or her class through the lens created by racist or classist stereotypes serves only to perpetuate the oppression that is already in place."

Carbone (2010)

Intersecting oppressions result in toxic relations which are exacerbated by the lack of structural supports. Stereotypes and prejudices that permeate the culture often are reinforced through teacher-student and peer interactions in schools. All this can produce mental health problems.

*My teachers would seem to act like I was not there. It seemed like the teachers did not think it was a big deal when they would treat me that way, even though it obviously had an impact on me. Once I got older I thought that the teasing or racism would stop because we were older, and getting more mature but I was wrong. I somehow lost the friends I had when I was younger, and once we got into junior high they had their groups and I had mine. My group of friends included people with the same color skin as me. There weren't a lot of us, so we still got made fun of a lot. The teachers would even make fun of us too, not necessarily call us names, at least not to our faces, but they would talk differently to us ... some teachers would even laugh when a student would call me something bad or make fun of me. (Reported by Kendra Irwin)*

Despite a school's emphasis on racial and gender diversity, the educational system in the U.S., from K-12 to higher education, continues to disproportionately discriminate against subgroups viewed as having low-status, and overwhelmingly benefits socially dominant subgroups such as white males (Hewstone, 2015). This is reflected in academic achievements and in subsequent post high school career paths. For example, at all levels of the education system, females of color are viewed unfavorably and are not supported in preparing for fields currently dominated by males and whites (e.g., they are the most underrepresented subgroup in high-power, lucrative fields such as science, technology, engineering, and math). This not only reflects their internalization of society's racial and gender expectations, it is an indicator of biased selection and systemic herding and tracking in education institutions (Chinn, 1999; Kerby, 2012).<sup>2</sup>

To counter bias, schools have pursued diversity initiatives. For the most part, such initiatives stress assimilationist strategies that historically have been used to benefit white males and often are detrimental to minorities (Lomax, 2015). Diversity initiatives can be counterproductive in the absence of key structural and functional changes that effectively counter biases and provide appropriate supports. This is especially the case at many institutions of higher education where diversity initiatives mainly result in the admission of a small number of underrepresented subgroups. Once enrolled, such subgroups are highly visible and on display, which tends to increase personal and interpersonal misgivings associated with intersections of gender, race, etc. (Turner, 2002).

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### **2013-2014 Findings from the more than 95,000 schools & 50 Million Students Surveyed**

(From the Civil Rights Data Collection, U.S. Dept. of Education, <http://ocrdata.ed.gov/>)

- 49.7 percent of public school students are students of color: 24.7 percent Hispanic or Latino of any race, 15.5 percent black or African-American, 4.8 percent Asian, 3.1 percent two or more races.
- 6.5 million students missed 15 days of school or more. That's 13 percent of all students and 18 percent of all high school students. This chronic absenteeism indicator is new to this year's report.
- Black preschoolers are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended than white preschoolers.
- 51 percent of high schools with high black and Latino enrollment also have assigned police officers.
- 1.6 million students attend a high school with a police officer but no guidance counselor.
- Black students are 2.3 times more likely than white students to be referred to law enforcement or arrested as a result of a school incident.
- Fewer than 3 percent of English language learners are in gifted programs, though they make up 11 percent of students at the schools that offer those programs. Similar disparities exist for black and Hispanic students.
- For the first time, the Education Department asked about educational services for young people in justice facilities, including jails and prisons. 21 percent of these facilities offer less than a full school year of instruction.
- Black and Latino students make up 38 percent of those enrolled at schools that offer AP courses — but less than a third of students taking AP courses. Similar disparities were found in advanced math and science courses like chemistry, physics, algebra II and calculus.
- In schools with high black and Latino enrollment, 10 percent of teachers were in their first year, compared with 5 percent in largely white schools.

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## Some Implications for Changes in School Policy and Practice

*... it has been suggested that teachers unconsciously favor those students perceived to be most like themselves in race, class, and values; culturally relevant teaching means consciously working to develop commonalities with all the students.*

Gloria Ladson-Billing

*Part of this consciousness means that school staff must not favor students similar to themselves in making social contacts and enhancing learning and must not negatively hover over students who may differ from them, especially with respect to disciplinary measures.*

Adapted from: Equity Initiatives Unit  
Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland

Clearly, the concept of intersectionality is complex and fundamental to any discussion of schooling. Biases, segregation, and disparities remain widespread. Policy, politics, social philosophy, and practice converge in ways that make efforts to enhance equity of opportunity and social justice and celebrate diversity in schools controversial.

Given all this, an appreciation of intersectionality is essential in making policy and developing effective practices. Critical to moving forward in appropriately accounting for relevant subgroup and individual differences are (1) addressing institutionalized biases and barriers that negatively affect them and (2) enhancing efforts to accommodate and promote diversity.

To these ends, policy must ensure that school structures and functions that determine daily operations and personnel development activity are designed to (a) support and enhance staff and student diversity, (b) promote equity of opportunity, social justice, and cultural brokering and interchange, and (c) minimize discrimination and violent acts. When transgressions occur, there must be effective enforcement of policy and supports provided to those victimized.

Practice must implement structural changes related to instruction, student and learning supports, and the administrative/governance components of schools (Adelman & Taylor, 2015). Classrooms must address such matters as how to establish a good match between instruction and learning, how much diversity should be a curricular focus, and how to balance teaching about commonalities and differences (and relatedly how much diversity should be promoted and celebrated). With respect to enticing and preparing underrepresented groups to enter high-status fields, schools must incorporate into the curriculum direct contact with minorities working in those fields (e.g., presentations, mentoring, job shadowing, internships, academy programs) and provide scholarships and financial supports to overcome economic barriers. And support organizations dedicated to addressing bias.<sup>3</sup>

Many of these concerns have been and continue to be the focus of research; however, there is still a great deal to learn about the impact of and the school's role with respect to matters such as intersectionality, accommodating significant individual and group differences individual differences, addressing barriers to learning and teaching (including negative biases), and re-engaging disconnected students and families.

Besides the references used for this resource, these matters have been explored in various other resources developed by the Center; these can be freely accessed on the Center's website (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>). For example, see *Understanding Diversity to Better Address Barriers to Learning* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/newsletter/sum16.pdf>. And for more, see the Center Quick Find on *Diversity* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/diversity.htm>

## Concluding Comments

A wide range of concerns have been raised about intersectionality and diversity. Consider all the variables that require attention: age, gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, migration and refugee status and experiences, religion, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, language, socioeconomic status, education, group identity, position in the social hierarchy, communication modality, level of acculturation/assimilation, developmental stages, stages of ethnic development, level of acculturation/assimilation, individual preferences, popular culture, family and lifestyle, workplace culture, and more.

As the population in the United States continues to grow in diversity, the response of some is to embrace differences; others work against those who are “different.” Embracing diversity on school campuses requires creating and supporting values that encourage students and staff of all backgrounds to interact with mutual respect and support and develop authentic relationships. This calls for transforming school policies and practices and doing away with any that work against equity of opportunity for all. Positive changes will create a “hidden curriculum” that can improve social-emotional development of all students, prepare them to live in an increasingly diverse world, and enhance social justice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Intersectionality plays a profound role in shaping the culture, climate, and inequities at educational institutions. Bias affects treatment of students and affects staff hiring and promotion (Clauset, Arbesman, & Larremore, 2015). In some educational institutions complaints about biases are given short shrift (Ceasar, 2013). This makes the school environment feel uncertain and unsafe for racial and gender subgroups of staff and students.

<sup>2</sup>Despite the many barriers, in the 2008-2009 school year, women of color did earn a greater share of college degrees compared to their male and white female counterparts. From 1997-2007, the number of master’s degrees earned by women of color doubled, and the number of doctoral degrees they earned increased by 63 percent (Kerby, 2012). This shows that institutional barriers do not necessarily detriment the life outcomes of women of color. Rather, the richness of life experiences can be a source of resilience that combats structural barriers.

<sup>3</sup>Through grassroots organizing, community building, inter-minority coalition building, and social activism, advocates are constantly challenging and changing the social understandings of subgroups and facilitating an increasingly healthier environment in some schools and beyond academic institutions. For example, women of color have been pioneers in bridging the gap between race liberation movements, feminist movements, and queer movements and have been pillars in political activism. Their strong political presence displays their power of resilience and intelligence and motivates other underprivileged and underrepresented groups to stand up and fight for social justice. (See Appendix.)

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## Appendix

### Lessons Learned: Organize for Action

Historically, grassroots organizing has been an effective way for underprivileged communities to self-empower and mobilize political forces to combat structural oppressions. Many grassroots organizations are powerful buffers to the systemic injustices against underprivileged communities, and aided in improving educational attainment as well as mental well-being. The work of these organizations highlights the importance of community building in combating ongoing oppression and fighting for structural change.

Examples of organizations relevant to this resource (descriptions taken from the internet):

- *College Access: Research & Action* (<http://caranyc.org/>) – “CARA’s programs confront the gap in post-secondary guidance faced by first-generation to college students in New York City. They help transform the cultures of educational institutions by training a wide range of people within those communities to support all of their students to and through college, and by providing curricula to help young people build knowledge about college, strengthen navigational skills, and develop multicultural college-going identities.”
- *Urban Youth Collaborative* (<http://www.urbanyouthcollaborative.org/>) – “Led by students, the UYC brings together New York City students to fight for real education reform that puts students first. Demanding a high quality education for all students, our young people struggle for social, economic, and racial justice in our schools and communities.”
- *The Undercommons at UCLA* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/233324780334976/?fref=ts>) is “an ongoing public meeting space for the sharing of marginalized ways of knowing that are often devalued by the university. When these are uplifted and mobilized, they can spark revolutionary change regarding what ‘public education’ means and how to achieve liberation, especially for working-class black, native and other people of color with our diversity of genders, sexualities, and abilities.” This organization has been instrumental in mobilizing scholars and advocates on campus as well as in surrounding communities to speak up and fight against the systemic injustices in society and in schools. They are dedicated to advising local high school students, the majority of whom are people of color, and helping them through community events such as hosting workshops regarding education, racism and sexism awareness, and ethnic and indigenous histories.
- *A New Way of Life* (<http://www.anewwayoflife.org/>) – “advances multi-dimensional solutions to the effects of incarceration. We provide housing and support to formerly incarcerated women for successful community re-entry, family reunification and individual healing. We work to restore the civil rights of formerly incarcerated people. We empower, organize and mobilize formerly incarcerated people as advocates for social change and personal transformation.”
- *STEM From Dance* (<https://www.facebook.com/STEMFromDance1/timeline>) – “Using dance as a culturally relevant source of confidence to bridge the gap to America’s most promising jobs – STEM (science, tech, engineering, math)”
- *The Women of Color Network* (<http://www.wocninc.org/>) – “a national grassroots initiative dedicated to building the capacity of women of color advocates and activists responding to violence against women in communities of color. Through trainings, technical assistance, and advocacy, WOCN helps foster Women of Color in the advancement of their anti-violence work and leadership.”
- *Nation Coalition of 100 Black Women* (<http://www.100blackwomen.org/>) – “To advocate on behalf of black women and girls to promote leadership development and gender equity in the areas of health, education and economic empowerment.”

For more on youth developed organizations, see *Youth Participation: Making It Real* – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/youthpartic.pdf>