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Teaching Note—#BlackGirlsMatter and the Social Work Curriculum: Integrating Intersectionality Within Social Work Education

Ijeoma Opara  and Tiffany L. Brown

ABSTRACT

Black girls experiences are often ignored and not discussed within social work classrooms. We urge social work educators to center the heterogenous experiences of Black girls within their curriculums. This teaching note presents intersectionality as a framework for teaching social work students about working effectively with Black girls by focusing on their unique social location. We provide strategies that engage social work students through case studies using qualitative research, student reflections, educational videos, and guest speakers. By using an intersectionality lens, social work curriculums can provide an important foundation for students to understand the nuanced ways that Black girls develop and experience the world.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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During the spring of 2020, global protests erupted in an effort to bring awareness to structural violence and anti-Black racism within the United States. Academic institutions, professional organizations, and public-sector companies all released statements denouncing racialized violence, while calling for increased representation of Black voices and perspectives to support the country's healing process. The resounding message at the core of these social justice initiatives is that #BlackLivesMatter. As a human services field that has its roots in pioneering against social injustice, social workers are uniquely positioned to contribute to the fight against systemic racism in our work with communities, families, and individuals as well as in our research. We can also make significant contributions to achieving racial justice through the ways in which we approach the preparation of future practitioners in the field.

This teaching note aims to highlight the value we have for Black lives, while more specifically addressing that #BlackGirlsMatter and how the intersection of race \times gender \times age contributes to the marginalization of Black girls. For Black girls, their experiences are often grouped together with Black boys or even further, convoluted with all adolescent girls. While the experiences of girls and women in the United States are shaped by a patriarchal system that marginalizes those whom identify as female, Black girls face a unique experience due to their sociohistorical context of slavery and subsequent systemic gendered racism that applies specifically to them (Collins et al., 2015). The focus on Black girls reflects the difference in the treatment that Black boys may experience due to racism, while also different than the marginalization that White girls and women may experience due to their gender.

Race, ethnicity, class, religion, and gender can have a profound effect on adolescent development that may be ignored in research and practice—thus resulting in broad generalizations that may further marginalize certain populations (Day-Vines et al., 2003; Harrison, 2017). An aim of Black feminist theory has been to increase consciousness, empowerment, and social justice for Black women (Collins, 2000). However, incorporating the discussion of how to effectively empower Black girls within social work practice has been limited in the extant literature. Highlighting the social locations of Black girls in the United States is crucial in the field of social work, and it is essential for social work students to be equipped to examine and challenge their own biases when working with this group. Furthermore,

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pedagogical approaches that address multiple social identities support social work students in their understanding of the factors that influence developmental outcomes and provide pathways toward effective social work practice with Black girls.

We urge the social work field to incorporate strategies within their curriculums on how to incorporate a strengths-based, antideficit lens when working with Black girls. This is crucial to acknowledge intersections that contribute to Black girls' unique experiences. As Black female educators, whom have worked with Black girls in clinical practice and community-based settings, we provide examples on how social work educators can use empirical evidence (e.g., quantitative and qualitative studies) to inform their teaching of cultural strengths (e.g., empowerment and ethnic-racial identity) in integrating the critical examination of Black girls within the classroom. Intersectional perspectives also help to elucidate the unique challenges and cultural meanings attributed to experiences based on multiple social identities.

Overview of intersectionality theory

While antiracism ideologies are often taught in social work classrooms (Singh, 2019), educators may unconsciously miss the opportunity to delve into a deeper critical analysis of the multiplicative identities in which Black girls possess. Grounded in Black feminist thought, intersectionality is a framework used to examine multiple dimensions of identities and various social locations, while highlighting the manner in which they intersect (Crenshaw, 1991). Although intersectionality has been conceptualized in many different ways, prior research suggests an individual's multiple identities intersect to shape personal experiences (Crenshaw, 1991), at times to form "intersecting oppressions . . . that work together to produce injustice" (Collins, 2000, p. 18).

Intersectionality can be conceptualized as a framework that guides methodological considerations (Abrams, 2020; Bowleg 2012) and data interpretation. More specifically, within teaching, intersectionality can be used as a guide to inform social work curriculum (Robinson et al., 2016). It is important to consider intersectionality as a framework for constructing teaching and learning approaches because it can aid in the selection of course materials, in-class assignments, and research topics that specifically aim to examine variables such as race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES)/class and how such variables intersect to affect the developmental experiences of adolescents (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Opara et al., 2019). We advocate for intersectionality to be integrated within social work curriculums, rather than solely a theory that simply organizes assumptions, ideas, and perspectives. Intersectionality can inform the field of social work by moving us beyond categorical characterizations of the Black experience, into seeing the diversity both within and across groups.

Although some social work programs have begun to teach intersectionality as a part of their foundational theory courses, there is also a need to design course content, assignments, and lectures in ways that help to personalize intersectionality concepts. More specifically, supporting students to see themselves and others in ways that highlight how the intersections of multiple social identities affect how one experiences power, privilege, and oppression (Robinson et al., 2016) is critical to humanizing Black girls. In addition, this approach aids in developing a deeper understanding of oneself in relation to Black girls as clients. Overall, using Intersectionality as a framework can help social workers to make fewer assumptions or generalizations when working with Black girls.

Considerations for educators about Black girls

In the true essence of social justice, Black communities in the United States continue to experience discrimination in the areas of housing, education, employment, accumulation of wealth, disparities in mental and physical health, criminal justice, politics, and media (Miller & Garran, 2007). As Crenshaw (2018) begins her dialog, she introduces the title "*All women are White and all Blacks are male, but some of us are brave,*" as an example to display the flaw in mutually exclusive movements that view race and gender as separate constructs. This flaw leaves Black girls and the experiences

they face ignored, thus marginalizing them even further. Furthermore, not using an intersectional approach can create blind spots for practitioners, compromising their ability to effectively meet needs of clients.

Black girls are often viewed through a deficit lens in research and teaching (Nunn, 2018). Even more worrisome is that social work educators may discuss Black girls in a homogenous nature, discounting their intersectional identities. Within the classroom, incorporating the use of case studies for students, Black girls may be described as mostly living in urban, low-income communities, thus creating a single view of them as synonymous with the experiences of all impoverished adolescents. While it is important for social work students to be aware of how poverty and SES can affect the lived experience of young Black girls and family dynamics, other identities and experiences may be overlooked, leaving a flawed and limited view of Black girls in the United States. For example, discussions around the experiences of high-achieving Black girls, middle-class or upper-class Black girls whom live in predominantly elite Black neighborhoods or predominantly White neighborhoods, are rarely discussed in the classroom (Anderson & Martin, 2018; Mims and Williams, 2020; Nunn, 2018). This leaves behind crucial accounts of experiences relating to ethnic-racial identity development and mental health that may not be taken into account in the discussion of working with Black girls. Through an intersectional lens, we should acknowledge that Black girls' experiences are not homogenous and multiple intersecting factors are in place that will contribute to their view of self in relation to others.

Strategies for intersectional teaching about Black girls

One of the goals in working with Black girls should be the development of their sense of empowerment. Four classroom strategies that we have found effective are the use of: analyzing case studies using qualitative data, reflections of assigned peer-reviewed articles and books, guest speakers, and multimedia. All of these strategies incorporate elements of experiential learning, an important paradigm for enhancing critical thinking in higher education (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011). These approaches are purposely flexible and can be used in a variety of bachelor's-, master's-, and doctoral-level course work, including elective courses on adolescent development, policy, research, and practice courses.

Case studies using qualitative research

Developing case studies for social work students can be challenging, as it is important for instructors to think about the key elements they would like for students to grasp. As social work students may have aspirations of working in a school setting or in areas that serve students, it is critical for social workers to understand how school dynamics can further marginalize and oppress Black girls. Using case studies through qualitative research is based off of a two-step approach. First, an educator should understand the qualitative findings of the study and description of study. Understanding qualitative findings (quotes from youth participants), as these are the voices of youth, can inform the development and use of the case study. Clonan-Roy et al. (2016) offered qualitative data that use the narratives of Black and Hispanic female adolescents who discuss challenges within their school systems related to their race and gender while residing in a predominantly White community (see the Appendix). In this exercise, students learned about Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2005) and applied the theory to the experiences of high-achieving Black girls using qualitative data as a case study. By using qualitative data, instructors can use the voices of youth to deepen the discussion of research methodology with students.

Reflections on peer-reviewed articles and books

It is essential for social work students to be able to understand research and how it informs social work practice and policy. Within our classrooms, we assigned articles that discussed specific topics involving Black girls. Students were asked to reflect on an article and apply key concepts of the article to their social work practice and then present the article to their classmates. Instructors can be flexible with the amount of time they would like for students to present key findings of articles. The most important strategy in this approach is the selection of articles that highlight cultural strengths and perspectives for Black girls. As an example, Opara et al. (2020) was assigned to graduate students in a social work program. Key points that arose in this article were the use of empowerment and ethnic-racial identity and its effect on positive developmental outcomes for Black girls. While students reflected on the article, discussions naturally arose about how White or non-Black social workers can effectively engage in such antiracism and antisexism practices while also honoring cultural pride with Black female clients. In addition, we discussed how identifying specific dimensions of empowerment, such as leadership competency and policy control, manifest within Black girls (Opara et al., 2020). Within the classroom, we also provided concrete examples of empowerment principles and activism in Black girls, such as Mari Copeny, who advocated for clean water in her hometown of Flint, Michigan during the Flint Water Crisis (Green, 2019; Michigan.gov, n.d.). This approach provides a strengths-based lens, with which to view how Black girls use civic engagement as a way to challenge racism through activism. This example also allows for the educator and students to celebrate the strengths and accomplishments of young Black girls as activists (Vaughan-Lee & Dorman, 2010). In another study, Mims & Williams (2020) use qualitative findings from their interviews with Black girls who described their ethnic-racial identity formation and what it meant for them to be Black girls. In this reflective activity, students learn the definition of ethnic-racial identity, how its formed by Black girls, and the important influence of environment on identity formation. This approach allows social work students to engage in rich and memorable discussions of key themes of the study in a relatable way.

Within the context of school discipline, Black boys receive the most attention within the literature regarding this topic. This is concerning because Black girls are six times more likely to receive out-of-school suspension than White girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015). While research on this area is beginning to emerge in the literature, it is essential that social work educators be equipped to address school discipline within the context of Black girls' experiences, as they are often ignored (Blake et al., 2011; Morris, 2016). *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, written by Monique Morris, describes the way that society has a misinformed and misunderstood view of Black girls in the United States that has unfortunately contributed to punitive policies that have disproportionately affected Black girls. The novel *Pushout*, which has recently been adapted into a movie, can be assigned to students to read in its entirety or to watch in the classroom, followed by a facilitated discussion on how social work students can actively work on challenging negative stereotypes and beliefs that have harmed Black girls within the school system.

Guest speakers

As educators, we are often viewed as experts in a particular subject. However, there are topics that are important to discuss that a lecturer may not fully understand. Therefore, that topic is either under-discussed or not addressed at all. The use of guest speakers, particularly those who are not social workers, was used in our classes for the following reasons. First, social work can be an interdisciplinary field. Social workers often interact with different professions throughout their careers (e.g., probation officers, attorneys, teachers). Depending on the field, social work students should understand the perspectives of other professions to be able to effectively communicate and advocate for Black girls when in the field. In our classrooms, we invited Black women who are in the field of social work, psychology, and public health fields to discuss concepts that relate to empowering Black girls through

various levels of practice, research, and policy. These guest speakers are also real-life embodiments of intersectionality principles who provide students with real-world examples from the field in working directly with Black girls in different settings.

Educational videos

The pedagogical benefits of using videos in the classroom are associated with increased engagement with the course materials by students that provides a deeper understanding of the material. TedTalks were used as well, as they are relatively short and deal with the most pressing issues of the day. TedTalks are also often packed with interesting ideas and inherently shareable information. For example, in our adolescent development course, students watched a five-minute Ted Talk delivered by Daniella Carter, a transgender Black girl in New York City who struggled with homelessness. The video brought out a very strong reaction from students as many of them acknowledged that they have never worked with a transgender youth of color and did not explicitly know the unique struggles that these youth face.

Sociological films, such as *A Girl Like Me*, can be useful in describing the experiences of Black girls and their sense of self in relation to the world. *A Girl Like Me* is a documentary directed by Kiri Davis (2005) when she was 16 years old. The seven-minute documentary examines colorism, hairstyles, and facial features that affect Black girls' view of self. Within the video, the film recreates the classic experiment, "The Clark Doll" study (Clark & Clark, 1939), which demonstrates how children are asked to describe the Black doll versus a White doll, in which children attributed the Black dolls to be "bad," or "ugly," and the White dolls to be "pretty" and "good." Such social experiments show how young children not only learn racial stereotypes but how such stereotypes can be internalized by Black girls, thus affecting their overall sense of self and identity. This short film also demonstrates diverse ways that Black girls experience and perceive their Blackness, which further demonstrates the importance of using intersectionality as a lens.

Practicing reflexivity

Reflexivity is a very personal process and is cultivated by the awareness of power differentials embedded within research, the classroom, and clinical settings (Abrams et al., 2020; Reed et al., 2012). Reflexivity lends itself well to the use of intersectional approaches in education settings because it challenges categories of oppression that have been embedded in society (Nnawulezi et al., 2020). Although social work students and clinicians should routinely engage in reflective practices in which they actively attempt to identify assumptions, stereotypes, and the personal feelings that may arise when working with or learning about Black girls' experiences, it is essential for social work instructors to engage in reflexivity as well. As instructors are in positions of power to infuse knowledge on others, their assumptions and personal experiences may come through within classroom instruction. As members of power, students rely on instructors to be objective in their instruction yet passionate about social justice. Thus, a balanced yet empathetic approach is needed in relaying information regarding Black girls. Instructors must also be willing to go against their original view or thinking of the experiences of Black girls and present their intersections in an unbiased way.

It is essential that instructors first develop a classroom climate that allows students to feel safe and secure with being vulnerable. As pointed out by other scholars who have taught intersectionality within the context of social work programs (Robinson et al., 2016), "[I]n order to fully grasp intersectionality concepts, students need a degree of vulnerability." Having students explore the intersections of their own identities to better understand how privilege and oppression operate based on social identities is a powerful tool in fully grasping intersectionality concepts. In addition, instructors may want to share their unique social location and explain how their intersecting identities have produced distinct experiences for them (e.g., Reed et al., 2012).

Conclusion

While we have provided suggestions for social work educators to consider, we acknowledge that our guidance is not exhaustive. Those of us in social work education train students to meet the needs of the most marginalized, therefore we cannot afford to remain silent or accepting of the status quo on the injustices that have negatively affected Black girls. As we acknowledge that there are many intersections that social work students should be prepared to understand, we stand firm on the importance of centering the lived experiences of Black girls, highlighting their strengths and purposely teaching social work students strategies on increasing racial identity, self-esteem, and honoring heterogeneity among this group. Social workers have the unique position to have a positive effect on the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalized; using our power is essential in adequately advocating for children and nurturing their resilience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

“But you know as I grew older and kind of got a mind for myself, and you know, I kind of portrayed myself as how I think Black women should be portrayed. . . . And my mom really kind of helped me along in that journey, seriously like then was young teenage years, you just want to like fit in and my mom's just like, you know, like, ‘Stand by what you think and stay true to yourself,’ basically. So I think that helped me a lot especially in this [her school] community. So just to be myself, and myself is just you know—it's like I go to school here, you know I consider myself smart, and . . . you know to make a point of me being here, being my best self here, which I think it says a lot for you know like, all Black women everywhere, just like showing people who just do what needs to be done.” (Renée, 12th grade)

Directions: The 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development are discussed with students before this activity is assigned. Then students are asked to read each case study and choose one of the Cs that align with the description from the quote. Students are not given the Clonan-Roy article to read before the assignment.

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