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## **Dissed: The Removal of Black Educators from the American Schoolhouse**

### **About the Author(s)**

Sunni Ali is an Associate Professor at Northeastern Illinois University (NEIU) Urban Community Studies Education Program.

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### **Keywords**

Key words: Social Justice, Education Reform, Culturally Responsive Practice



## "DISSED": THE REMOVAL OF BLACK EDUCATORS FROM THE AMERICAN SCHOOLHOUSE

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### Abstract

For almost a decade, the teaching profession has seen a drastic shortage of Black educators. The closing of many schools in urban areas has helped reduce the number of Black teachers in the profession. Also, evaluative protocols and rubrics that measure effective teaching practices harbor biased lenses that impact how Black educators maintain their employment status to succeed in the profession. Without promoting recruitment and retention interventions and culturally applied methods to assess teacher effectiveness, fewer students will have an opportunity to experience Black educators in their lifetime. The research paper used a critical race and culturally responsive theoretical framing to review the research literature to determine how Black educators receive evaluations and become dismissed from public schools.

### Introduction

In a profession seen by most policyholders, business leaders, and city developers as babysitting on steroids, Black educators have taken the worse hit for existing teachers. With countless schools being closed in black and brown areas for either poor academic performance, financial mismanagement, or students' behavioral challenges, many Black and Brown educational professionals were displaced in recent years. Implicit biases also resonated and became more confirmed as the tax-paying public questioned why individual urban schools and teachers should receive money for failing to deliver quality outcomes. Undoubtedly, the intelligentsia of black educators has become critiqued about public schooling as they stand in front of children.

Not surprisingly, Black professionals in any U.S. commercial industry are often questioned about their intelligence. Regardless of their credentials, economic background, educational degree, and family arrangement, they are often seen as incompetent practitioners (Foster, 1998). The racist scrutiny and stigma attached to being a Black professional are comparable to living on a televised episode of *Survivors*, especially in corporate America or the work setting.

### Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT), as framed by scholar Cornell West (2017), Michael Apple (1993) bell hooks (1996), analyzes the inequities and racial biases prepared in education. Educational approaches traditionally permeated and espoused societal structural racism to assess Black teachers' and students' school performance. The racial politics in education further determined who would stand in front of American children in a classroom.

Adopting a culturally responsive education that promotes Black achievement and scholarship is centered on Gloria Billings-Ladson (2009), encouraging interventions and practices that radiate teacher and student achievement. But, more importantly, the theory

strongly encourages the receipt of training and a great awareness by teachers and administrators to improve their responsiveness toward Blacks to promote their success.

### **Evaluated**

Despite being illegal to mistreat and unfairly assess Black employees, most corporate and school settings do not miss a beat regarding how supervisors view this workforce. As documents from the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) report time and time again,

No group of workers alleging discrimination — age, gender, disability, or otherwise — fares well. Race claims, however, are among the most commonly filed and have the lowest rate of success, with just 15 percent receiving some form of relief, often compensation. (Jameel and Yerardi, 2019)

Discrimination occurs in this country every day, but it remains hard to prove. If it is not overt, most prejudicial tendencies remain subversive or hidden, making it harder to prove in a court of law.

An article from *Ed Weekly* confirms the biases that consume the evaluation of Black professionals. When Black educators work in classrooms, they typically receive a lower score on their evaluation assessments than their White counterparts (Will, 2019). Sadly, it appears gaining certification from testing, and other credentials is not enough for Black educators to achieve. Instead, the evaluation systems claim black educators require more training and support because they do not know how to teach.

According to *Ed Weekly's* findings, "Still, teachers of color, especially Black teachers, are 50 percent more likely to receive low evaluation ratings than white teachers within the same schools" (p. 2). A misinterpretation of cultural factors and biased perceptions have a lot to do with why too many Black educators are seen as ineffective. A Black educator interacts with students, and the diverse ways they choose instructional support learners should become understood by school officials before an evaluation occurs. This means administration requires training and an awareness of the culturally responsive practices that often happen in a classroom led by a Black educator (Kunjufu, 2002).

When such professional development does not happen, too often, Black teachers' tonality, expressions, and behaviorisms are seen as threatening, professionally disengaging, and not attentive to school norms. In many cases, Blacks are subjectively evaluated with how well they mastered "whiteness" (Embid, 2017; Omi and Winat, 1994; Lipman, 1998). Thus, they receive a lower evaluation score (Embid, 2017). The study further found that "Low-rated teachers of color are more likely to leave the profession than low-rated white teachers. In other words, the evaluation rating is a more meaningful predictor of teachers leaving than race or gender" (p. 3). When black educators receive inadequate evaluations and overtaxed critiques, they do not just leave a school; they find it doubly hard to secure employment at another school (Barnum, 2018). As a result, they often leave the profession, which explains why the numbers of Black educators continue to drop. So, do their schools close, and the inadequate evaluations that Black teachers receive help push them out of education.

Even in short supply, Blacks are seen as inept or incapable of managing a classroom, especially teaching White children. The scrutiny mostly heightens in districts and schools where a person can use one hand to count the number of Black educators in a building. Steele and Aronson (1995) delve into the tragic view too many white colleagues and parents have of black teachers, referring to it as the stereotype threat. A stereotype threat, according to Steele, can occur in situations where students, teachers, or parents perceive the capabilities, problem-

solving, and task-unrelated ability of a Black educator as inferior and less significant. These views affect how districts and white educators in charge determine who will stand or not stand in front of their children (Rosenthal, 2002; Weinstein, 2002). In addition, limited exposure to Blacks' behaviors, cultural patterns, and interactions further affects how Black educators are seen as ineffective practitioners.

Again, research dispels such racist notions of black educators displaying professional ineffectiveness in a classroom, regardless of their work environment. An empirical and observational study produced by PROJECT STAR (2008) observed 79 schools in Tennessee of black and White teachers instructing similar student populations, finding no significant differences with their performances. The schools reviewed in the study, on average, had a 67 percent white student population and a 94 percent white teacher population, a 10 percent Black student population, and a 3 percent Black educator population. Their observational findings indicated:

Among black children, the results suggest that having a black teacher for a year was associated with a statistically significant 3 to 5 percentile-point increase in math scores. On the reading test, the scores of black pupils with Black teachers were 3 to 6 percentile points higher. Meanwhile, white students placed with a white teacher scored 4 to 5 percentile points higher in math. In reading, white boys had scored 2 to 6 points higher when learning from a teacher of their race, but no significant differences could be detected for white girls. (Achilles, Pate-Bain, Bellott, Boyd-Zaharias, Finn, Folger, Johnston, Word, 2008)

Although the data presented different racial output performances when Black teachers instruct Black students and white educators teach white students, when the instructors rotated between these students, no academic differences occurred. This finding proves Black teachers are just as effective in a classroom setting as white instructors no matter who they teach. Also, it demonstrates the importance of having qualified and competent Black teachers as a part of a school community, especially for Black children.

The 2008 study further noted that racial prejudice is so steeped toward the black teaching population that it affects teacher and student performances. The consequence of the stereotype threat

Produces expectations about what people are like and how they will behave. And such expectations on the part of a teacher can influence their students' performance, and that the black-white achievement gap may result from the differential treatment that black students receive in school. (p. 17)

Too often, racial misnomers are digested, which impacts the way students, administrators, and professional peers interact and engage Black educators. Ultimately, people digest the distortions and misperceptions as a reality, which professionally harms Black educators working in a predominately white environment. The study concluded that parents' complaints and inadequate evaluations of black teachers impacted their attrition rates in those settings. Black educators began to feel overly sensitive, frightened, and more professional pressure to deliver academic outcomes. Such stigmatization and hypersensitivity ultimately affect their performance and ability to work with students.

### **A Necessary Workforce**

The symptom of being seen as a less qualified and inadequately credentialed employee, regardless of a person's educational background, continues to persuade the views of

policyholders and mainstream society toward the Black teaching force. Even with professional support, resources, and mentoring delivered to black educators, a school district's inability to address racial prejudices and biases will continue to lessen Blacks' entry and attrition rates into education. Most significant is the amount of research that explains how the average white citizen views or perceives a black educator in a classroom in front of white children (Steele and Aronson, 1995; Kunjufu, 2002; Delpit, 2013).

"Teaching While White" is not a new phenomenon or racial occurrence, as some parents believe white teachers are more intelligent and offer more significant, in-depth perspectives versus a black or brown educator (Yancy, 2018). White parents are not the only ones privy to this phenomenon; given the lens of internalized racism, some black and brown parents operate under this same misconception (Billings-Ladson, 2009; Kunjufu, 2002; Delpit, 2013). As Yancy stated in her study, "Even some black students and students of color will grant unquestioned epistemic credibility to white teachers in ways that they will not grant credibility to Black teachers and teachers of color" (p. 32). A study found that 23 percent of whites believed a white person with a high-school education has the same degree of intelligence as a Black person with an undergraduate degree (Cohen, 2018). It does not just stop there; study respondents asserted that a Black person with a Ph.D. possesses comparable intelligence to a White person with an undergraduate or master's degree (Winat, 2014). These findings help to explain why the pay scale and wealth gap remain stagnant and persistent, with a white male having a high school degree annually earning income equal to what a Black man makes with a college degree (Kurtzleben, 2014).

With schools increasingly disappearing in Black and Brown areas, policyholders further sent a message to this teaching population that they failed to prepare their children. And yet, there rests a great history of Black educators since the Reconstruction era of successfully teaching Black children—students who made incredible gains and progress attending freedom schools in segregated learning spaces. Even with limited resources, Black teachers proved how important they are to the lives of all students (Anderson, 1988). As Delpit (2016) and research from the Johns Hopkins Institute (2018) argue, "Having one Black teacher in elementary school not only makes children more likely to graduate high school—it also makes them significantly more likely to enroll in college" (p. 1). The instructional, personal, and cultural connections black teachers have with black students are so profound that not being exposed to a Black educator exhibits significant consequences in the lives of Black children—particularly when they have never been exposed to or encountered a Black teacher.

On average, Black educators are "More generous with minority students, devoting more time to them and making more favorable assumptions about their capabilities. At the same time, teachers may be relatively generous with white students in just the same ways" (Dee, 2004, p. 2). A lot more empathy and compassion resonate from educators who know the importance of affirming students' fallibilities, mainly when it entails the high and sometimes cruel insensitivities thrust their way. Inevitably, this builds more security, compassion, and academic confidence in learners who "like" their teacher and find their personable and connective relationship essential for them to do well (Kunjufu, 2002).

More telling is that "white teachers expected significantly less academic success than Black teachers" and were "12 percentage points" more likely than Black teachers to predict Black students wouldn't finish high school, regardless of the students' economic status and family stability (Papageorge, 2016). Black educators are necessary to the lives and health of all

students. Students need to see Black teachers in front of them, offering a different lens, truth, and responses to connect their lives to people existing outside their culture. It certainly helps acknowledge that racism and systematic prejudice are fundamental social forces, neither imagined nor fabricated to play a "race card" (Love, 2019). Having educators from other cultures and experiences only strengthens race relations to dispel prejudice and stereotypes while promoting intellectual diversity.

One truth about having a Black educator is that the mythology of white superiority wanes, which is critical for white students and minority learners not to embrace. Typically, White students often receive lessons that connote and validate their world as being falsely superior. Moreover, a white perspective is promoted continuously and is a practical way to problem solve and strategize. Black teachers can help students navigate and find counter perspectives from supremacist and Eurocentric cognitions, with most of the lessons already pronounced in a Eurocentric pedagogy.

Without Black educators in front of White children, how else will they learn about other people, their perspectives, and how they function in the world around them? As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2018) claims:

I want to suggest that there is something that may be even more important than black students having black teachers, and that is white students having black teachers! White students need to encounter black people who are knowledgeable. What opportunities do white students have to see and experience black competence? (p. 3)

Black intelligentsia certainly does not just appear on a basketball court, football field, or comedy show. Instead, Black intelligentsia pronounces itself daily in attorneys' offices, doctor visits, political arenas, and upper-middle-class communities across this nation. Unfortunately, having white children not experience Black intelligence in action perpetuates racism and implicit biases toward Black Americans. Blacks are an indigenous American population deserving of respect and admiration for being the pioneers, builders, scientists, warriors, and others necessary to sustain the group's existence on the world stage (Ali, 2018).

Without Black teachers around, Black children are more likely to know very little about their history. When Black educators exist in a school, it provides a racial match for black learners with a pronounced and cumulative effect on the Black learner. Students want to know and learn more about what makes them unique (Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009, and 2018). Learners' experiences become authenticated when someone with whom they identify confirms their cognitive perspectives. Students also gain efficacy when they comprehend that their views about the world are not that far-fetched or invalid.

The presence of Black educators also helps explain why Black colleges historically have done so well in educating and affirming the achievement of Black learners. Black students who attend these settings have a higher graduation rate than their peers attending white institutions and are more likely to achieve master's and doctorate degrees after obtaining their undergraduate degrees (Wooten, 2015). Billings-Ladson (2018) adds:

I cannot imagine my career in the academy had I chosen one of the predominately White colleges/universities into which I was admitted. Instead, I went to a Historically Black College/University where my mostly Black professors exposed me to a comprehensive liberal arts education and taught me some of the nuances associated with operating successfully in the Whitework world. (p. 2)

What makes HBCUs so necessary is the fact their spaces affirm students' identity and psychology. Also, the schools make students believe and understand they are highly capable of achieving beyond society's racial constructs. Considerable research declares that when Black educators are in front of students of color, more than likely, the learners believe the teacher cares for them and expects them to achieve (Billings-Ladson, 2009; Moore, Ali, and Penick-Parks, 2017).

Indeed, having campuses with a diverse teaching force beckons the idea that the community is a liberating space that promotes America's pluralistic notions. The existence of black and brown teachers in a school building with a diverse student population also says to the world that democracy works. As Kohl (1995) states:

Providing schooling for everyone's children reflects liberal, middle-class values and aspirations to ensure the maintenance of democracy and ensure that power, the culture of power, is accessible to everyone. (p. 35)

Thus, it is essential to institute corrective policies, educational incentives, and improved hiring practices to have more Black and Brown educators in the classroom. Doing so will advance America's system of governance and democratic notions of equality and equity. Schools with a Black- and Brown-educated teaching population in front of children demonstrate education is the great equalizer and a necessary conduit to evolve the way people think and view the world. Historically help promote America's progress is an improved, educated populace that possessed an upgraded racial attitude, awareness, and an intellectual thought process. A diverse teaching force contributes to a society's ability to do just that. However, when there is only the existence or presence of an all-White or -Black teaching force in a schoolhouse, it brews separatism and centrism.

### **Conclusion: Disappearance Crisis**

School settings without Black educators around affect the self-esteem of learners. The self-esteem of Black learners is surrendered, and enthusiasm to participate or belong to an environment where a person is welcome declines. Evidence mounts that black and brown children are more likely to drop out of school than any other student population (Jill, 2018). Conversely, black and Brown educators' presence sparks interest among children of color to become more engaged and enthused about learning and attending school to achieve specific goals (Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009 and 2018).

The flux about attending school influences a student's inability to connect to cultural stakeholders or race allies and does not grant them any protectorates from racial discrimination. Love (2019) refers to this phenomenon as "spirit murdering" when Black and Brown learners are strip-searched, arrested, culturally disarmed, and shown little compassion, which explains why students of color, quite often, hate going to school. As Love suggests:

"Spirit murdering" argues that racism is more than physical pain; racism robs people of color of their humanity and dignity and leaves personal, psychological, and spiritual injuries. Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things children need to enter school and learn. (p. 2)

It is bad enough the children do not have or see cultural advocates in front of them fighting for their right to learn and enjoy schooling. Children as young as 11 also have to encounter racial incidents that treat them as disgusting and inferior.

Statistics continue to drive home the dropout rate of Black students and black teachers from schools, indicating comparable numbers for both. Neither Black students nor teachers like attending or working at school very much. Whereas 22 percent of Black teachers leave the profession, 30 percent, on average, of black learners do not finish high school (Barnum, 2018). The atmosphere for both the pupil and teacher is similar. Walking through an American school door every day, Black teachers and students often encounter racism, marginalization, and invisibility as they try to function.

With Black teachers experiencing spirit murdering, students of all colors and hues are left with hardly any Black teachers in front of them. Without Black teachers, who will educate the American teaching force and the administrators and children? Who will advocate for diversity in the curriculum and among their peers and their students? Who will insist that the schools do better, especially when planning and improving students' intellectual perspectives and well-roundedness? More importantly, who will take Black educators' place to serve as advocates, models, and acumen guides for children to achieve greater understanding and survival wittiness?

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