


Chapter 4

Disrupting Educational Spaces: Confronting a Culture of Whiteness While Centering Young African American Boys as Public Intellectuals

Elbert Hawkins III

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9815-8401>
Carolina Psychological Associates, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the weaponization of whiteness within education, particularly in K-12 education. Situated as a cultural phenomenon, educators who ascribe to this ideology do so out of fear—fear of what they understand and know to be true; young African American boys are the epitome of public intellectuals. However, marred by some educational leaders and stakeholders, many young African American males within our educational systems are bound to a common narrative that marginalizes, dehumanizes, and positions them as less than others. Low-performing, ill-equipped, hyperactive, and a societal problem is a narrative that enters classroom and learning spaces all too often before they do. In this work, the hope is to begin a courageous conversation regarding the implications of whiteness and how it egregiously disrupts the education of young African American boys. Also, framed as an autoethnography, readers will engage in seven questions to learn firsthand why a culture of whiteness within our school and classroom spaces is a crisis we must seriously dismantle.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-9236-9.ch004

INTRODUCTION

Turning our imaginations and dreams into tangible and concrete possibilities is a testament to true liberation and freedom. In many ways, our imaginations determine who we decide to embody or become (e.g., the chemist, philosopher, entertainer, architect, artist, etc.). Maxine Greene (1995) explained, “To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or “common-sensible” and to carve out new orders in experience” (p. 19). Yet, unfortunately, many K-12 educators throughout the United States fail to create classroom spaces and opportunities for some school-aged children, particularly young African American boys, to imagine and self-actualize their possibilities. In school systems and classroom learning spaces throughout our country, African American males are misunderstood, misrepresented, and feared—resulting in unjust educational practices that leave them lost, unenthused about school and learning, unloved, and unattended to within the margins. Educators, particularly teachers, who fail to acknowledge and see them holistically also fail to imagine a learning space where community, collectivism, and love should be at the heart of their learning experience (p. 37).

Based on my experience as a former school counselor, some teachers’ lack of attention, biased demeanors, performances, and exclusionary practices toward young African American boys are not by happenstance—they are intentional. For example, they exclude them not only based on academic ability but their style of dress, language, and misunderstood behaviors (i.e., curious questioning, a need to manipulate or hold tangible objects while learning, the need to move, etc.). Researchers throughout the literature suggest this exclusion has little to do with socioeconomic status or academic prowess but more to do with race and racism. Howard (2013) stated, “Thus, even the so-called privileges that accompany social and economic mobility do not seem to thwart the presence of race and racism when it comes to the schooling experiences of Black males” (p. 62). Alluding to racism and whiteness as well, Kondo (2019) asserted, “Essentially as whites position themselves as both the standard and normal, people of color function as the necessary other” (p. 613). Thus, making it challenging for teachers (both white and nonwhite) to visualize or see young African American boys as children filled with joy and excitement, curiosity and possibility, and as public intellectuals. Therefore, I ask: “When does the promise of freedom and liberation begin for young African American boys?” I argue that young African American boys will begin to experience an authentic sense of freedom and liberation when they are seen and positioned as public intellectuals—people who resist the seduction of a narrow understanding of the world in which they live.

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