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# Separate but Unequal

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# SEPARATE BUT UNEQUAL

ABIGAIL COVINGTON



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**M**y mother has been an educator in the public school system for twenty years, with each school year bringing new students and their varying personalities. Working in some of the toughest neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., my mother and her fellow teachers had to manage the added issues of low educational achievement that plague black students. One school she worked at, Ruth K. Webb Elementary in Northeast D.C., had a gloomy, prison-like setting and was surrounded by a housing project. With dim lights and damaged property, it was a place of general unhappiness. The predominately black community neighboring the school was underdeveloped, violent, impacted by low socioeconomic levels, and afflicted by drug abuse. My mother regularly worked late into the night grading, preparing lesson plans, and literacy development programs to better her students. The students often struggled to keep up with the curriculum and were continually below grade level in reading and math. Though my mother was a fifth-grade teacher, she repeatedly had to get books from the first- and second-grade classrooms, even taking our literary educational program “Hooked on Phonics” as a supplement. While I believe my mother’s students benefited from attending her class, her experience as a teacher in a poorly funded school system raises concerns about students across the nation who face similar destitute learning environments.

### **Society’s Failure of Black Youth**

Tamika Thompson reports that only fourteen percent of black eighth-grade students “scored at or above the level of proficiency to pass the eighth grade.” She notes that “on average, black twelfth-grade students read at the same level as

the white eighth-grade students.” According to the Schott Foundation, the national graduation rate for black males in 2012-2013 was estimated at fifty-nine percent in comparison to eighty percent for white males. These statistics reflect how the educational system forces black children, black males in particular, out of the academic world by the time they finish middle school, pointing to the massive disparity in the quality of education for black students. Why are black students failing on almost every level within the education system? Why is it a question that has yet to be adequately addressed?

Research suggests poverty is the long-term aggravator which gives way to unemployment, violence, low educational achievement, and a plethora of other social issues. Although low educational achievement falls under the umbrella of poverty-related issues, it’s still a very broad problem in itself, like a tree with many branches. While there are a variety of reasons for low educational achievement, it happens disproportionately amongst black children because of three factors: an absence of representation in school faculty and curriculum, methodologies and formatting of instruction that do not consider the composition of the student body, and the lack of attention teachers afford toward the individuals in their classrooms. By way of poverty and socioeconomic dynamics, the American educational system is failing black students.

### **Lack of Representation**

The lack of representation in the classroom often goes unnoticed. Many black students find it difficult to identify with their teachers, who in the United States are likely to be middle-aged, middle-class, white women, living outside the community in which they teach, preventing these students from envisioning themselves in

that leadership role. Similarly, these teachers cannot identify with their students on a racial, socioeconomic, and geographical level. Nathaniel Sheppard at St. John Fisher College has researched ways in which poverty has exacerbated low educational achievement amongst black youth. In his research, Sheppard found the lack of identification students have with their teacher to be a major issue.

It's a representation issue that's even more intense for black males. Black males are sixty-six percent more likely to live in a single-parent home headed by mothers. It is important that they see black men in positions of power so as not to emasculate their ideological beliefs on what they can accomplish.

Sheppard suggests that the representation of black individuals in positions of educational power as necessary to close the achievement gap between race and gender. Specifically, black males are regularly emasculated by society and their experience in school initiates the process as early as primary and intermediate education.

Additionally, black students are often unable to identify with the subject matter found in the format of the school's curriculum. For children of color, their history and cultures are taught as a sidebar and not required as part of the core curriculum. My interest in writing was sparked when I began to look for representation of my

importance. Black students would possibly be more engaged and interested in their coursework if their race was reflected in their studies. There are black pioneers, engineers, scholars, musicians, artists, activists, and revolutionaries that can accompany any lesson plan, but school systems tend to neglect this fact and attempt to streamline the education to mirror the majority.

### **There is No "One-Size-Fits-All" Solution**

In their 2013 study, "Teacher Education and Black Males in the United States," faculty members from the University of Pittsburgh, H. Richard Milner, Ashley Woodson, and Amber Pabon, as well as Ebony McGee, a faculty member from Vanderbilt University, argued that teachers in the United States are not effectively educated on properly teaching students with diverse and, sometimes, complicated backgrounds. The authors studied an array of statistics, including the differences in proficiency rates between black and white males, sociological studies on the mindset, task force initiatives to end the educational achievement gap between races, and their individual methodologies. They concluded the way in which black males are treated by those within the educational system needs to change before any genuine systemic societal change can occur. In this study, McGee shared her personal

**"their history and cultures are taught as a sidebar and not required as part of the core curriculum."**

race in literature that was not included in the syllabus. This inequality is present in various K-12 curriculums nationwide. The history and cultures of all students, especially those who are marginalized, should be taught with equal

story about her experience as an educator who helped white teachers discover new methods to teach students from diverse racial backgrounds. During her consultation with her coworkers, she noticed they desired a one-size-fits-all so-

lution to educating a diverse body of students. When McGee explained the importance of gender and racial intersectionality, she was met with confusion: “It complicated their notions of a predetermined and packaged rubric

sensitivity, or awareness during instruction.

The responsibility of an educator is to ensure the best possible education and learning environment for their students under any circumstance, which sometimes require instructors to

## **“The responsibility of an educator is to ensure the best possible education and learning environment for their students under any circumstance...”**

that would serve all historically marginalized students” (Milner 254). Students come to the classroom with different knowledge and experiences, particularly black children from rough, urban environments, and teachers should have a sensitivity to these differences, adapting the instruction as necessary.

### **Individualized Instruction**

Children might enter the school system with anxiety, anger, depression, and exhaustion as a result of various life stresses, which many instructors may not take into consideration. Children cannot be expected to abandon their personal problems while at school, as these issues impact all aspects of their lives. Due to mandated reporter laws, teachers are obligated to contact authorities if they suspect one of their students is in a potentially life-threatening situation; however many who go into this field neglect this part of the job description. It is necessary for teachers to know if there is a present issue prohibiting their students from achieving the highest success and, ultimately, attempt to fix this. Frequently, there are teachers who do not personally know their students and have no desire to have a relationship with them. As a consequence, this can create a hazardous learning environment with no empathy,

be more flexible than they would like. When I reflect on the teachers who went above and beyond educating me, I realize they provided experiences no one can ever take from me and I will never forget. Those lessons, whether social or academic, remind me that I do not have to be a statistic, and that systemic inequity has no hold on my potential greatness. Regardless of race, gender, geographical location, and socioeconomic class, all students should be ensured the opportunity for a quality education.

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