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Unapologetic Black Inquiry

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Introduction

Numbers lie. Numbers tell incomplete stories. Numbers manipulate. Despite the racist history of social statistics (Zuberi, 2001), quantitative analyses predominate educational research and conversations about who Black students are, how they experience schooling, and what they need. Through the years quantitative research has told us that “there are more African American men incarcerated than enrolled in higher education” (Schiraldi & Ziedenberg, 2002). However, these findings were based on incomplete data and make a fallacious comparison between college enrollment and incarceration (Desmond-Harris, 2015; Toldson, 2019). Additionally, this statistic is inherently anti-Black as it finds fault with Black men, rather than the social, political, and economic conditions that oppress Black men. Further, statistical analyses also have told us that “Black women are now the most educated group in the United States” (Helm, 2016). Yet, much of the discourse about Black women’s educational success is fueled by statistical comparisons of Black women to Black men and neglects the oppressions impacting Black women (Patton & Croom, 2017).

Empirically driven conversations about the state of Black education often reinforce crisis and deficit narratives. Black critical theories have laid the groundwork for shifting the conversation away from Black dysfunctionality. For instance, Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and BlackCrit Theory (Dumas & Ross, 2016) argued racism and anti-Blackness are central research concerns. Black feminist theorizing (Collins, 2000, 2004; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989; Dillard, 2000; hooks, 1984) established Black women’s knowledge as epistemologically valid. In order to continue efforts to center Black humanity and work towards Black liberation, we propose engagement with Unapologetic Black Inquiry (UBI). Allen and Miles (2020) define Unapologetic Blackness as “the centering of Black identity and culture in places and spaces where race is neutralized and racial politics are silenced or ignored” (p. 3). UBI then is a theoretical–methodological approach that centers Black humanity and liberation through Black defiance and dissident knowledge and by examining the intersections of anti-Blackness in institutions. Later we will apply UBI to a
study on Black girls’ schooling experiences to demonstrate how such a theory can also be applied as method for the development of racially just, critical theoretical research.

A brief history of Black educational challenges

A cursory glance at the history of Black education within the United States reveals several troubling and damning trends as it relates to educational access, support, and success. Most prominently is historian Carter G. Woodson’s thesis regarding Blacks’ miseducation. Woodson (2000) maintained that Black education had developed through a series of handicaps, including state-sanctioned actions that undermined and blocked attempts for Black educational progress. In speaking about shortcomings of Black education, and the ways in which Blacks suffered in U.S. schools, Woodson stated,

to handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one’s aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime.

(2000, p. 3)

Similarly, in his critiques levied against Black education, Du Bois (2002) articulated a range of challenges that Blacks face in the U.S. educational context, not least of which is that, “Negro children will be instructed in the public schools and taught under unpleasant if not discouraging circumstances. . . . [T]hey will fall out of school, cease to enter high school, and fewer and fewer will go to college” (p. 151). As these scholars and others note, particularly related to the educational challenges that Blacks have endured, the school system perpetually miseducates, neglects, and fails Black people (Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 2002; Epps, 1973; King, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Woodson, 2000), especially when educational institutions are bastions for white supremacy, racism, and whiteness. How does one imagine Black educational success if Black students are set within schools that are designed to see them fail (Noguera, 2008)?

In reflecting on education for Black Americans, education scholar Edgar Epps (1973) noted that educational goals and strategies must be considered within the framework of U.S.-based race relations. Overwhelmingly, as other scholars have discussed regarding the miseducation of Blacks (Du Bois, 2002; King, 2005; Woodson, 2000), all too often schools “fail to educate large numbers of blacks to even the minimal level expected of American adults is one consequence of being black in America” (Epps, 1973, p. 316). This educational neglect includes the ongoing ways that Blacks are denied access to educational opportunities, facilities, and programs. Historically, the denial of educational opportunities for Blacks has been based on white supremacist ideology and a white racial (i)logic. White supremacy and white racial (i)logic are racist and anti-Black ideologies that wrongly presume that Blacks are uneducable. Such racist ideologies then limit the education of Blacks to simple
trainings of subservience to whites or forcing contentment of occupying the lower echelons of economic and occupational systems across the U.S. Without doubt, these modes of thinking and the practices they produce are not only problematic for many reasons (e.g., educational neglect) but they also are predicated on anti-Blackness. As a consequence, much of the schooling processes that include subversion of Black intellect, thought, and life (re)produces Black suffering (Comeaux & Jayakumar, 2007; Dumas, 2014; Love, 2016; Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Tillis, 2018). This suffering and educational neglect reveal themselves through school practices and policies that include hampering educational access, fostering hostile schooling environments, and delimiting educational outcomes.

Across various studies of Black students’ schooling experiences, researchers find that they continuously suffer from low and lowered expectations, routinely are overpoliced and hypersurveilled, are overrepresented in exclusionary disciplinary practices, and often are repositioned away from educational success (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darenbourg, 2011; Brooms, 2020; Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019; Clark, 2020; Dumas, 2014; Duncan, 2002; Evans–Winters, 2011; Ferguson, 2001; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2015; Rogers & Brooms, 2020). For instance, in a critical race ethnography of the schooling of adolescent Black boys, Duncan (2002) found that these youth were an estranged population as they were neglected within the school. More specifically, various school practices rejected the experiences and stories of Black students (e.g., Black language was framed as in opposition to school values), created an ethos that marginalized and excluded Black male students from the school’s caring networks and academic program (e.g., students indicated they were regularly ignored by peers, felt overpoliced by staff members, and experienced teachers routinely mistreating them), and, were subjected to low expectations (e.g., teachers often failed to provide these students with appropriate or honest feedback about their work). Similarly, Matias (2016) demonstrated that whiteness embedded in teachers (many of whom are white) created the conditions for Black and Brown students to learn to hate themselves. In each of these ways, and others, Black students in schools “suffer a condition characteristic of a population that is beyond love,” a condition that ultimately relies on their marginalization and oppression and also excludes them from society’s economy and networks of care (Duncan, 2002, p. 140; also see, Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Ferguson, 2001, Rogers & Brooms, 2020).

Relatedly, studies show that disciplinary infractions and sanctions are imposed on Black girls at alarming rates as well (e.g., see Blake et al., 2011; Clark, 2020; Morris, 2015). In examining Black female students’ experiences in an urban school district, Blake et al. (2011) found inequitable discipline where Black girls were “overrepresented for exclusionary discipline sanctions and were twice as likely to receive in-school and out-of-school suspensions than all female students” (p. 99). And within higher education contexts, Black students routinely endure anti-Black violence and race-related stressors, particularly at predominantly white institutions (Brooms, 2017; Griffith, Hurd, &
Hussain, 2019; Mustaffa, 2017). As findings from research discussed earlier indicate, as well as other related studies, not only are Black students continuously burdened by denigrating and deficit-laden ideologies, overly punitive school policies and practices, and what Duncan (2002) articulates as “beyond love,” they also are relegated as “faces at the bottom of the well” (Bell, 1992). Clearly, as even recent experiences and scholarship demonstrate, the miseducation of Black folks is rife within U.S. society.

**Theorizing Black humanity and liberation**

Throughout U.S. history, unapologetic Blackness has existed in the actions and behaviors of Black people from all walks of life. Black girls continue to “talk back” and stand up for themselves in the face of oppression despite being stereotyped as “loudies” (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). Unapologetic Black Inquiry (UBI) is situated in a tradition of Black defiance to white supremacy and is rooted in critical theory aimed at understanding Black thought, Black lives, and Black experiences in the U.S. context and globally. UBI is particularly indebted to the pioneering research and activism of scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Carter G. Woodson and, in the latter half of the 20th century and more recently, scholars such as James Baldwin, James H. Cone, Joyce King, and Gloria Ladson-Billings. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* (2005[1903]) and Wells’s *Southern Horrors* (1892) stand as exemplars of using an unapologetic Black research approach to effectuate change for Black communities. Du Bois (2005) articulated how racism impacted Black life (e.g., problem of the color line) and helped create the intellectual argument for the Black freedom struggle throughout the 20th century. In engaging the Black freedom struggle, Wells (1892) demonstrated the possibilities of interrogating white-dominant narratives and crafting counternarratives, simultaneously. Wells’s aim was to expose the lies that were used to support majoritarian stories that defiled Black life and provide greater context and insight, which ultimately honored Black humanity.

Similar to Wells’s approach, UBI understands that calling out white lies is necessary for honoring and affirming Black life. White lies, such as ones propagated within the field of education about Black student success, or lack thereof, function to dehumanize Black students. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argued that Black students’ success in education was diminished by the burden of “acting white” – the idea that Black cultural aesthetics are incongruent with educational success, which is considered as a white cultural norm. Even as this narrative grew in popularity, little credence was given to the inferior social and economic opportunities that Black students confront and, even further, social scientists produced little empirical evidence to substantiate such claims (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). Problematizing Black students is the legacy of knowledge production in the academy which employs white methods and white logic. White logic is infused with a sense of superiority that assigns objectivity to elite whites and subjectivity to People of Color. White methods are tools that manufacture empirical data and analyses to support racial
stratification – as well as the maldistribution of resources and opportunities (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Given that empirical methods were developed within the context of colonization, slavery, and Black subjugation, all too often they are deployed to mask white supremacy and justify Black oppression. These methods are easily weaponized to consign fault with Black students and their families. Therefore, it is not surprising that the findings of Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) work, which reaffirmed existing beliefs about Black dysfunctionality, blamed Black students and their communities for lagging educational outcomes, and defined Blackness as anti-school, remain influential in current and ongoing education discussions.

As Fanon (1967) theorized, the “fact of Blackness” is both that Blacks are perpetually subjugated to a white gaze (see Yancy, 2008) and too often crushed under the weight of racist stereotypes (along with ongoing irrational and insidious justifications for these stereotypes and other forms of anti-Blackness). Thus, it is precisely because of the fact of Blackness that “the specificity of the Black” (Wynter, 1989) is critical to UBI. Relying on and appreciating Black experiential knowledge then necessarily pushes back against white insistence that we must justify Black experiences – or, even worse, must juxtapose Black experiences against white experiences. Insistence on objectivity as the standard for research is white-centric, problematic, and a lie. Black experiential knowledge exists outside the confines of an objective/subjective dichotomy and in our theorization is its own entity. That is, Black lived experience is in itself real, important, and valuable in its own regard. As an example, there is little need to explain the recent collective response to the unarmed murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. These killings exist within a long history of devaluing Black life and within a system that allows (and perhaps even encourages) white violence against Black bodies, spirits, and minds. As a result, the anti-Black racism and violence, miseducation, and suffering that Blacks experience within educational contexts must be documented and they must be used to reject white hegemonic schooling and other policies and practices that inform white-centric education. Black people and communities who have these experiences and live to tell their stories should be valued. UBI honors this valuation and can be used to document, appreciate, and learn from these realities to affirm Black humanity and create the conditions for liberation.

Conducting research without confronting white lies misses an opportunity to appreciate Black humanity and can contribute to Black subjugation. UBI understands Black dissident knowledge is valuable and necessary for Black liberation. More specifically, Black knowledge produced through counter storytelling and Black feminist epistemology are critical tools for Black liberation and humanity. From slave narratives and stories of survival to achieving in spite of as opposed to because of schools, Black Americans have a long history of oral traditions and harbor great knowledge through their own experiences that help inform and teach each other ways to navigate and negotiate various educational environments and, in some ways, move from surviving to thriving. Black critical theories have utilized Black voices to challenge white lies.
All knowledge is constructed based on location, history, culture, and interests, therefore there are multiple versions of the truth (Collins, 2000). Similar to Critical Race Theory’s use of counter storytelling, or storytelling that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or “myths” as a research method (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), UBI sees narratives and stories as powerful tools to center Black life and Black humanity.

UBI interrogates the narratives, storylines, myths, and stereotypes told of Black people using a cultural, racial, historical, and political lens. This research focus can help us relocate deficits away from Black youth (Baldridge, 2014), understand institutional racism and the ways that it undermines Black schooling experiences (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Graham & Robinson, 2004; Massey, Vaughn, & Dornbusch, 1975), appreciate institutional betrayals of Black students (Brooms, 2020; Delpit, 2006; Lofton & Davis, 2015), and see with better clarity the ongoing spirit murdering of Black students (Love, 2016; Tillis, 2018). Such an interrogation problematizes the ways that Blackness is (re)constructed as a problem, as it too often is littered by anti-Black oppression and violence within and across various schooling contexts.

Finally, UBI seeks to be both specific and inclusive. Anti-Blackness is endemic in the U.S. and central for understanding Black experiences (Du Bois, 2005; Dumas & Ross, 2016). Further, the lived experiences of Black people across social identities is inextricably linked. Black feminist theorizing has consistently recognized that within the U.S. context African Americans share a common experience of racism; however, the form that racism takes varies by race, gender, social class, and sexuality (Collins, 2000, 2004; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, anti-Blackness is gender specific. In observing the similarities and divergences across Black experiences, Black feminist scholars introduced and applied concepts such as intersectionality and the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000, 2004; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to explore how structures make certain identities at risk for discrimination. Relatedly, the matrix of domination explores how systems of oppression are organized through structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains (Collins, 2000). These concepts allow us to understand how Black experiences converge and diverge. UBI extends this theorizing by asking: How do we make sense of a multiplicity of Black experiences?

**Framing Unapologetic Black inquiry**

In order to employ UBI as method, we identify three themes to define Unapologetic Black Inquiry and demonstrate its application: Black Subjectivity, Affirming Black Humanity, and Black Specificity and Multiplicity.

**Black subjectivity**

Unapologetic Black Inquiry rejects positivists’ insistence that research is and should be objective. A researcher’s prior knowledge, experiences, and perspectives
are influential in the research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Tillman, 2002). Therefore claims of objectivity are delusional. Borrowing from Black feminist epistemology (Collins, 2000), which asserts that all knowledge is constructed based on location, history, culture, and interests, UBI acknowledges that the subjectivities researchers bring to research frame the types of questions asked, how understandings and knowledge are positioned and appreciated, and how interpretations are drawn. The history of social statistics reveals that white supremacists’ notions about racial superiority and inferiority guided its development (Zuberi, 2001). UBI requires Black subjectivity to thwart those embedded racist ideologies.

UBI understands both Black students and Black researchers as outsiders-within. Outsiders-within are able to identify contradictions and double standards within educational spaces (Collins, 2000). Black students, due to their marginalization in schools and educational spaces, are uniquely positioned to identify contradictions. Similarly, Black researchers are endowed with “cultural intuition,” or the multiple sources of knowledge they may bring to research (Huber, 2008; Malagón, Huber, & Velez, 2009). While Black researchers may have personal, academic, professional, and research experiences that may come to bare in the research they may also be disconnected from the realities of Black students; therefore, the primary subject when using UBI should be the students themselves. The voices, concerns, and ideas of Black students should be a central focus throughout the research process. The requirement of Black subjectivity does not preclude researchers who do not identify as Black from using UBI. Just as we note the importance of Black subjectivity, engaging UBI requires that researchers, regardless of racial identity, engage in reflexivity, are transparent about positionality and subjectivities, and link these to the how and why of their research.

**Affirming Black humanity**

Unapologetic Black Inquiry also seeks to enrich the tenet of Critical Race Theory regarding the centrality of race and racism by focusing more specifically on anti-Blackness. Focusing on anti-Blackness elicits a shift in language, analysis, and interpretation. This shift means moving discussions and analyses away from standpoints that suggest racism affects all people in the same general ways and instead recognizes racist policies, practices, and customs as well as violence and harm predicated precisely upon “the fact of Blackness” (Fanon, 1967; also see Bell, 1992; DeGruy, 2005; Du Bois, 2005; Muhammad, 2011; Roberts, 1999; Wells, 1892).

**Shifting language and developing questions**

We reject the notion and application of race as a problem and as a causal variable. Race is not the problem; Blackness is not the problem. Rather anti-Black racism is the problem because it poses barriers in education to Black people and
Black communities. According to Bonilla-Silva (2017), contemporary racial inequality is (re)produced through seemingly non-racial mechanisms. Language that statisticians use such as “the effect of race” obscures the structural foundations of racial inequalities (Zuberi, 2001, p. 96). Instead of asking, “why aren’t Black students succeeding?” UBI would ask questions such as: “How do Black students experience and negotiate white supremacist curricula?” or “How do we create more enriching educational experiences for Black students?” Answering these types of questions involves analyzing Black students’ experiences within a wider social-historical and political perspective (i.e., how do messages about Black boyhood and girlhood outside of educational spaces shape curricula?) that calls out anti-Black racism without fear. This approach stands in direct opposition to Eurocentric paradigms, which are limited in understanding the experiences of People of Color and dishonest about the history of anti-Black racism in the U.S. (Huber, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Additionally, calling out anti-Black racism accommodates the counter-stories of Black people (Dumas & Ross, 2016) and thus allows us to better appreciate Black students’ humanity and reduce their suffering.

Intellectual resistance and self-definition

Unapologetic Black Inquiry is an undertaking of intellectual resistance and activism, with specific aims of Black liberation. Some may view CRT’s claim that racism is a permanent part of U.S. society as pessimistic—or, even further, “un-American” as we’ve seen in recent national talking points. However, as Bell (1992) explained, many subjects of racial domination find courage and hope in resistance and defiance. Black scholars are often forced to suppress their rage and justify Black-focused research agendas to navigate the academy. UBI provides an opportunity for Black scholars to recognize their work as an act of resistance and proclaim the legitimacy of their work. Understanding UBI as an act of resistance also allows us to identify everyday acts of resistance and interrogate how teachers/instructors and students challenge or reinforce stereotypes of Black students as intellectually inferior and incapable of learning. According to Collins (2000), self-definition commences with finding fault with the dominate white point of view, and subsequently developing one’s own point of view, and acting on it. UBI creates space for engaging Black students’ self-definition, self-valuation, and self-reliance. UBI might question how students resist controlling images and how they define Blackness on their own terms (Collins, 2000). Facilitating Black students’ self-definitions challenges the notion that Black students are anti-intellectual and serves to empower students and create space for Black liberatory fantasy.

Black specificity and multiplicity

As mentioned, anti-Blackness is gender specific; therefore, Unapologetic Black Inquiry attends to the intersections of anti-Blackness. Gender and sexuality
have been important factors in explaining the experiences of Black women, and are equally important to the experiences of Black men (Collins, 2004; Davis, 2003; hooks, 2004). Within the past ten years there has been a propagation of single-sex schools marketed toward the families of Black and Brown boys. This development warrants specific attention to the educational experiences of Black boys. When applying UBI the researcher should also consider how other members of the Black community are impacted. In justifying the need for single-sex schools stakeholders often rely on rhetoric that Black boys do not have appropriate role models at home. This argument draws on controlling images of Black men as missing fathers and Black women as incapable Black mothers (e.g., “they can’t teach Black boys how to be men”) and is frequently deployed in education discourse (Clark, 2017).

It is also important to ask who is missing from the view of our analysis? Most notably, this line of rationale sidelines the lives of Black girls as well as Black gay, queer, and gender-nonconforming youth. For instance, Black girls have many parallel experiences as Black boys related to school discipline, such as being disproportionately suspended and expelled, yet they are ignored as a result of the hyper focus on Black boys’ educational experiences and needs. Additionally, Black girls are repositioned as an impediment to Black boys’ academic engagement. Similarly, little thought is given to how Black gay, queer, and gender-nonconforming students may benefit or be harmed by a single-sex schooling environment.

**Applying UBI to Black girls’ schooling experiences**

**Black subjectivity**

In applying Unapologetic Black Inquiry we begin with Black subjectivity. In this view, we are sensitive to the subjectivities that we bring to our work as researchers as they inform our questions, understanding, and analyses. Both authors identify as unapologetically Black in their research agendas and work and are committed to Black education and liberation. Our experiences and our positions in the academy have established us as outsiders-within and endow us with cultural intuition that we bring with us to our research and praxis. The first author is Black woman educator who specializes in Black education and Black feminism. Her praxis includes advising Black Feminist Scholars, a student organization aimed at raising consciousness of issues impacting Black women and mentoring Black undergraduates interested in research. The second author is a Black man who is an educator and youth worker who engages a philosophy of Black education. He has taught in both secondary and postsecondary institutions, developed programs for and courses focused on the lives and experiences of Black boys and men, and has worked with Black youth in a number of capacities. We have both routinely observed and experienced the ways that schools marginalize Black students and their families, both unwittingly and intentionally. The legacy of anti-Blackness in the United States shapes our
understanding of educational neglect that Blacks experience across the educational system. We see the U.S. school system as a site of suffering whose motives should be questioned, interrogated, and analyzed.

We contend that UBI can be used by researchers from various racial backgrounds but, of course, with several notes of caution. Given UBI’s intentional focus on affirming Black humanity and working toward liberation, researchers who do not engage in such intentional approaches will find little utility in UBI. Additionally, given the ways in which whiteness dominates research as well as distorts and disfigures Blackness, UBI is not useful for researchers whose work peddles in anti-Blackness or even reaffirms or centers whiteness – regardless of the researchers’ racial identities. For these reasons, there are some inherent tensions in its use. That is, a researcher’s subjectivity as well as the racial ideologies that inform their work will matter in the utility of UBI. Researchers need to grapple with their racial identities and ideologies and discern how these situ-ate them in Unapologetic Black Inquiry research. Still, we acknowledge that UBI is not for everybody. There are many reconciliations. UBI is well-suited for both individual and collaborative research and can provide opportunities for researchers to interrogate their proximity to whiteness, how their racial identities inform their research, and how identities and ideologies matter in collaborative work.

**Black humanity**

After our positioning, UBI then demands a critical, more humanizing engagement with the literature already published. Here, we focus on the experiences of Black girls in schools through the lens of affirming Black humanity. In particular, we pay attention to how focusing on Black girls’ experiences can allow us to shift language and develop new(er) questions. Increasingly, scholars are bringing attention to the ways in which Black girls are harmed within schools. At the most foundational level, this harm is revealed by the ways in which white supremacy demands a right to and control of the Black female body (e.g., see McGuire, 2010; Roberts, 1999; Sharpley-Whiting, 1999). Within schooling contexts, Black girls are accosted by policies and practices that dictate and surveil their hair, clothing, attire, and behaviors (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2015). However, school discipline is often framed as a male issue. Black boys and men face routine and continuous scrutiny in school settings that contribute to their educational outcomes, with some being framed and constructed as “bad boys” (Ferguson, 2001). UBI, by engaging specificity and multiplicity is able to identify the ways all Black students are implicated by and suffer collectively under the weight of inequities in school disciplinary policies and practices.

Black girls experience inequitable school discipline precisely because of anti-Black racism. Race, gender, and class for Black girls combine to inform policies enacted on the embodiment of their Black femaleness. That is, because they can be repositioned as “loud” in their talk and speech, which inherently draws on stereotypical images of Black femininity and centers Black girls and young
women as targets for school discipline (e.g., their “loudness” is construed as gender-inappropriate behavior and a lack of self-control; see Neal-Jackson, 2018), they can be labeled as unruly and receive negative sanctions in school, which has personal, academic, and social significance and consequences.

School discipline policies, especially those that police students’ attire, hair styles, and speech volumes, often couched under the umbrella of zero tolerance and no excuses are problematic because they all constitute various forms of racialized surveillance. Thus, there is a need to shift language and develop new and different questions. For instance, asking questions that center Black girls as a/the problem (e.g., “Why do Black girls misbehave in school?”) reproduces their suffering in school and positions them away from schooling success. Alternatively, a UBI approach honors Black girls’ humanity and instead interrogates how their Blackness can be constructed as delinquent and deficient (e.g., “Why do schools establish and enact policies that problematize Black girls’ ways of being?”). This shift in language and questions not only provides opportunities to learn more about Black girls’ schooling experiences, through the examples we identify here, it also allows us to be more informed about the harmful impacts of school discipline policies and practices – even those that claim to be race neutral or colorblind and, even more importantly, helps instill humanization for Black students in school settings.

Black specificity and multiplicity

Finally, by engaging Black specificity and multiplicity, a UBI approach helps expand discussions of students’ schooling experiences, such as the school-to-prison pipeline. To do so a UBI approach recognizes, calls out, and resists white lies; even further, it also unpacks the harmful impact of racist stereotypes, assumptions, and storylines that are weaponized against Black youth – regardless of gender, class, and other social identities. Given the way that dominant narratives about school discipline are male-centric, and in some ways considered as an issue that seemingly solely challenges boys’ schooling experiences, focusing on Black girls’ experiences as well those of Black gay, queer, or/and gender-nonconforming youth are important. These foci can help education stakeholders and researchers better understand and appreciate similarities and differences in Black students’ experiences so that the remedies and solutions offered can be more specific and intentional.

As we draw attention to the specific experiences of Black girls we situate our discussion in the multiplicity of Black experiences. In examining national news discourse on the school-to-prison pipeline, Clark (2020) contended that the popular argument that more Black men in schools as teachers and administration will reduce rates of suspension and expulsion of Black students, particularly Black boys, is harmful and neglectful for a number of reasons. First, this proposed solution does not account for a multiplicity of Black experiences. Arguing for more Black men in schools is based on a Black boy-centric framing of the school-to-prison pipeline. Black girls are also victims of the school-to-prison
pipeline; yet, there is little consideration given to how more Black men in schools might impact them, nor Black gay and gender-nonconforming students. Furthermore, when Black men enter educational spaces there is a push for them to take on disciplinary roles which does little to lessen the harm that Black students experience in schools, especially since the institutional culture remains intact (Brockenbrough, 2015; Ferguson, 2001). Proposing more Black men as a solution to the school-to-prison pipeline ignores the contributions of Black women teachers and offers no analysis of the structural impediments that contribute to, produce, and are predicated on Black suffering in schools. Black student success is not as simple as a race alignment with a teacher. Clearly, there must be specificity and multiplicity in researching.

Overwhelmingly, the school-to-prison pipeline as well as punitive schooling practices create specific challenges for Black students and families, regardless of and because of intersecting identities particularly given the “condemnation of Blackness” (Muhammad, 2011) across various social institutions. Constructing Black male youth as “bad boys” as well as through other pathologizing images and tropes continuously repositions them as threats and dangers to themselves and others (e.g., Black girls), are attacks on their humanity, and diminishes their intellect and educational possibilities. Relatedly, Black girls are situated within a discourse that insists upon patriarchy and their behaviors are defined as threats to that patriarchy. It is unsurprising then that teachers interpret their ways of being as defiant and inappropriate. Ultimately, the policing of Black girls in educational spaces and across wider society is a racial project intended to constrain and justify the oppression of Black communities. Educational institutions too often work to suppress Black girls’ voices and their epistemologies. In doing so schools silence the opportunities necessary to support their development as well as their health and well-being.

Implications and conclusion

Unapologetic Black Inquiry seeks to challenge dominant narratives and traditional research models which increasingly opt for colorblindness rather than the specificity that Black experiences call for. Black specificity is a central component of Black inquiry. Black people are routinely subsumed under racist ideologies which imagine them through controlling images, such as hypersexual, violent, and anti-intellectual. This imagining ignores the complexity of Black experiences and interactions of race, class, gender, and other social identities. While engaging specificity, UBI also recognizes the interconnectedness of Black experiences across identities and accounts for Black suffering and violence experienced in educational contexts and within/across communities. A central aim of UBI is to create more just educational experiences for Black students. Unveiling anti-Blackness, which functions in subtle ways and allows us actively resist anti-Blackness in curriculum development, discipline policies, and classroom interactions, can make school a more humane and fulfilling space for Black students. Additionally, Unapologetic Black Inquiry has
the ability to highlight and value Black students’ resistance – especially to dysfunctional and abusive educational settings. By centering subjectivity, research can more readily see and appreciate Black students’ resistance to anti-Blackness and the multiple ways that they fight for and reclaim their humanity. Such an approach helps reveal pathways for how we all get free.

Note

1 While we center students in our discussion throughout the chapter, we also recognize and suggest that Blacks who are positioned in other roles (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) are included in our conceptualizing as well.

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