“White Man’s World”: How Gender and Racial Biases Affect One’s Growth in Academia

For centuries, the field of education has been dominated by white, cisgender men. This control is reinforced through several factors, including educational resource distribution that prioritizes white male students, cultural narratives that uphold traditional power structures, and educational policies that often center around Eurocentric perspectives and standards. These factors create barriers that perpetuate bias, restrict diversity in educational leadership, and leave marginalized voices struggling for equal recognition and opportunity.

The influence of white men in education is evident across various capacities, from the dominance of white men as tenured professors at prestigious universities to the continued focus on works by figures such as William Shakespeare. This stronghold in the academic world, from teacher to administrative positions, has left lasting imprints on American education. This is often to the detriment of individuals who do not fit within the narrow expectations set by white male standards. In light of this, efforts to increase diversity and inclusion have been taken in recent years to confront the continued effects of these racial and gender biases, however scholars note that this will shift in light of the recent election. As a result, People of Color and non-male identifying students have continued to face challenges in their academic achievements and growth.

In examining how the narrow viewpoint of white, cisgender male educators affect People of Color and non-male identifying individuals, a variety of common themes arose from researchers in the fields of sociology and gender studies. For one, most researchers examining this topic have concluded that racial and gender biases that have arisen in the field of education due to white males dominating the field have harmed People of Color and women’s educational

experiences. Furthermore, researchers have come to the consensus that white men continue to hold dominance in the field due to cultural and societal beliefs, and that this is a phenomenon that does not apply just to their education. Finally, it can also be found that a majority of researchers concluded that ignoring these injustices and biases in the classroom can largely be attributed to the discomfort of white individuals and male-identifying individuals.

In my research, I have chosen to examine particular examples of where race and gender bias appear in the classroom. Additionally, I have chosen to look at how these biases affect these individuals, and how individuals who are not directly affected by race and/or gender biases might benefit from examining their privileges and the challenges that their peers face in the classroom. While it can be noted that classroom biases can also affect Indigenous, disabled, and LGBTQIA+ students, for this paper I will examine the experiences of female-identifying students and students of color in grades K-12 before then moving into viewing racial and gender disparities in conjunction with one another. While intersectionality is a necessary approach to dismantling systems of oppression, to approach a system intersectionally, we must first address and name each element. After understanding how these biases appear individually, we are better able to understand the trauma that is experienced by a student facing both racial and gender biases in the classroom. Examining the issue of race and gender biases in the field of education manifests itself in nearly every context of our American culture, from Black student's inability to access quality education materials, to women and People of Color being expected to work twice as hard to reach the same education and career achievements as their white male peers. Looking at how race and gender bias harms students of color and women in the classroom is important because these biases are so often considered to be their fault or doing. However, race and gender bias in the classroom and beyond is upheld due to cultural and societal disparities that promote the idea

that women and People of Color could simply never achieve as much as their white male peers. My research finds this belief to be false.

One way in which the dominance of white males in academia has impacted others is through the racial biases that persist in classrooms at all educational levels, particularly at the K-12 grade levels. These racial biases affect People of Color in all educational facets, from their earliest experiences in academics. In a study performed by Rob Eschmann, a professor of social work at Columbia University, and Charles M. Payne, a distinguished professor of African American studies at Rutgers University, it can be noted that at a variety of educational levels, "black and Latinx students are disproportionately likely to be assigned to lower tracks. Within these lower tracks, research shows, these students receive poorer instruction than other students and develop low expectations of academic success....students who are placed for low-track reading instruction learn substantially less than their higher-tracked peers," (57). This usage of higher and lower tracking practices illustrates how biases against students of color are not only evident but are institutionally embedded into the educational system. For Black and Latinx students, being automatically assumed as less intelligent and therefore placed into lower tracks for reading or writing can have a profound impact on their confidence and academic self-perception. Dr. Calvin Rashud Zimmermann, a professor of education studies at the University of Notre Dame, performed a similar study. His research came to a similar conclusion, stating that the "research consistently finds that White teachers often rate Black students behaviors and academic abilities more negatively than White students," (156). This systematically implemented bias continues the cycle of marginalized students being restricted from reaching their potential, which limits diversity and reinforces white male dominance within

academia. These educational practices continue to disadvantage students of color and shape their experiences far beyond the classroom.

In the case of racial biases in the classroom setting, it is equally as important to discuss the topic of school poverty and school quality. Applying this is needed as it can be found that Black students are more likely to attend poorer, lower-quality schools than their white peers. Dr. Tomeka Davis, a professor of sociology at Georgia State University with a niche for racial biases in the field of education, has commented on this idea. Davis remarks that the "growth of the Black-white deficit over the course of schooling may be a result of the fact that Black students are more likely to attend lower-quality schools (measured in part as schools with more poor students, more problems like gang participation, larger class sizes, more teacher turnover, etc.) than white students," (173). This phenomenon is caused by several factors ingrained into our culture. However, here it is important to simply address the fact that, due to remnants of segregation culture and elements of gentrification, Black students are often provided with older or lower quality textbooks or internet access and less one-on-one interaction with their educators due to overcrowded and underfunded classrooms, negatively impacting their potential achievements.

In many cases, the disparities in resources between schools predominantly attended by Black students and those attended by their white peers stem from systemic inequalities that have long been embedded in housing, neighborhood funding, and educational policies. Given that these inequities are structural, they are clearly not the result of individual choice or failings of the students themselves. Historical and ongoing issues with school funding models tied to property taxes have consistently and disproportionately impacted schools in Black communities, which

often leads to fewer resources, underpaid and overwhelmed staff and faculty, and low-quality facilities. Davis, in this instance, finds that "economically poorer schools have fewer physical, fiscal, and human resources to increase student achievement. Poorer schools are also less likely to attract the most talented and experienced teachers, who can command better salaries in more affluent districts," (Davis 173). The limited availability of resources, such as access to higher quality technology resources, advanced coursework, and extracurricular programs, reflects societal priorities and funding policies rather than a lack of effort or capability of students of color. One key factor of addressing this issue requires acknowledging that these students of color are not responsible for these barriers, but are navigating an education system that often fails to serve them in an equal manner.

With these systematically placed tracks of academic success in mind, it is necessary to review how educators can justify placing students of color into these tracks in such large quantities. Without an understanding of the excuses made by educators in these cases, we cannot begin to dissolve these systematic barriers for students of color. The aforementioned study performed by Eschmann and Payne, which references a previous study performed by Grissom of Redding, noted that "minority students are half as likely to be classified as gifted as white students; and Black teachers are three times more likely than white teachers to recommend Black students for honors...when Black and white teachers are asked to comment on the same Black student, white teachers are almost 40 percent less likely to believe the student will graduate high school," (56). So, how do these white educators justify their overarching racist beliefs against their students? For one, very few teachers are equipped with the anti-racist curricular intervention skills needed to address their curriculum's racism, let alone their own internalized racism. This same study finds that "[while] well-designed and well-taught courses that grapple

explicitly with the subject of race are associated with positive changes in academic engagement, academic achievement, and personal empowerment for minority students...such courses call for pedagogical knowledge and strategies for which few teachers are trained," (Eschmann and Payne 62).

What is overwhelmingly the probable excuse for continuing an educational system that relies on racist beliefs, is that discussing racism makes white people uncomfortable. Eschmann and Payne go on to remark that "the larger problem is that conversations of this sort make white educators—and sometimes white parents—profoundly uncomfortable, raising issues they find divisive and threatening...the racialized nature of problems facing students of color in schools is often ignored simply because it is deemed too problematic to acknowledge the persistent influence of race in the schoolhouse," (62). This discomfort often results in a reluctance to address or even recognize the biases that are ingrained within the system, leading to policies and practices that continue to disadvantage students of color. A lack of open, honest conversations about race in education creates an environment where students of color may feel alienated or unseen, further eroding their sense of belonging and confidence in academic settings. Without even so much as acknowledging these racial biases, schools cannot hope to create an environment where all students are truly given an equal opportunity to succeed.

Classroom biases and a student's ability to communicate and write effectively are not solely contingent on a student's racial identity. Historically, standards for 'proper' education and 'proper' English-speaking vernacular have been established by cisgender white men, which therefore created a framework that has imposed biases not only against one's race but also based on one's gender. While advancements have been made to create a more inclusive educational environment for women and other non-male identifying individuals, these strides have often

fallen short of addressing deeply rooted stereotypes and patterns of gendered socialization. Before children even begin their formal education, they are influenced by society's traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity through gender socialization. Gender socialization is a cultural theory which argues that boys and girls are raised in varying ways in order to fulfill set gender and societal standards. Young boys, for example, are often encouraged to be assertive and confident in their classroom abilities. This early socialization empowers boys in their education to actively participate, ask questions, and approach tasks with a willingness to try and fail. In opposition to this, young girls are socialized to prioritize perfection and compliance, and are often pressured to meet high standards without making any mistakes. This kind of socialization can discourage girls from taking any sort of risks or asking questions, which creates a classroom setting in which boys are given more room for curiosity and failure than girls. Dr. Catherine Riegle-Crumb, an education professor at the University of Texas at Austin with a particular niche for gender, racial and ethnic inequalities in education, has spoken directly to this fact. Dr. Riegle-Crumb states that "gender stereotypes play a prominent role in [gender socialization], as boys are expected to be assertive, aggressive, independent, and strong, and girls are expected to be more docile, submissive, and social. Parents and teachers are critical players in this process, since they both establish expectations and enforce sanctions if children violate expected norms," (43). Therefore, the persistent impact of these early socialization patterns from our culture stand to shape students' learning experiences and contribute to implicit biases in self-expression, curiosity, and confidence in the classroom.

This gender socialization, and traditional gender expectations, lies within educators and therefore encourages young boy's confidence and young girl's failure to speak up in the classroom. These set gendered expectations are explored in *Education and Society: An*

Introduction to Key Issues in the Sociology of Education's chapter on gender inequality in the classroom. Here, it is noted that "teachers (and others) have gendered expectations of performance that are largely shaped by dominant gender norms and stereotypes, and this has clear implications for their everyday assessments of and interactions with their students. In treating students in highly gendered ways, they create and maintain differences in attitudes as well as outcomes; for example, female students exposed to low teacher expectations regarding their [math] skills are likely to become less confident," (Riegle-Crumb 48). Thus, the deep rooted belief of traditional gender expectations is ingrained into parents, educators and students alike, continuing white male's dominance in the classroom and communication well into the 21st century.

Classroom and societal gendered socialization also has strong ties to early childhood learning and social disability diagnoses between young boys and young girls. This close attention to the particular needs of young boys in the classroom proves that they are receiving extra special attention in the first place. Additionally, these noted diagnoses give them a leg up over their female peers, who might very well also be facing the same learning and social disabilities. Professors Dr. Claudia Buchmann, a professor of sociology at The Ohio State University, Dr. Thomas A. DiPrete, a professor of sociology at Columbia University, and Dr. Anne McDaniel, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology from The Ohio State University, researched this concept. They came to the conclusion that boys were, in fact, "overrepresented in populations with reading disabilities, antisocial behavior... attention disorders, dyslexia, stuttering, and delayed speech," (322). This extra attention directed toward young boys often results in a classroom environment where young girls facing similar learning or social challenges may be overlooked. As resources and interventions are focused on addressing the more visible struggles of boys, girls with similar

difficulties are often left undiagnosed and therefore unsupported. This bias can lead young girls to develop coping mechanisms in order to mask their challenges, which makes it more difficult for their teachers to then recognize and address their needs. Consequently, girls may fall behind in areas where early intervention would have provided significant support. This systemic neglect of young girls limits their opportunities for success and any self-advocacy in educational settings.

In examining the cases of racial and gender biases in the classroom, it is necessary to, at points, look at the two factors in conjunction with one another. A young Black female student cannot escape the fact that she is Black and that she is a woman, therefore exploring the two factors together is inescapable. Dr. Calvin Rashaud Zimmermann explains this intersectional viewpoint is necessary, by stating that "intersectional theories add nuance to studies of racial or gender differences in teachers' perceptions of children's behaviors because often ignored are potential differences within gender categories by race/ethnicity and differences within racial/ethnic groups by gender. More specifically, scholars argue that research frequently erases the unique schooling experiences of Black girls," (157). His research further remarks that, in the case of Black female students, "scholars also show how Black girls' everyday behaviors are perceived as "unladylike"... they are frequently criminalized in schools," (158). These biases and the criminalization of Black girls' behavior creates a hostile learning environment which therefore hinders their educational growth and confidence in their educational abilities. When Black girls are disproportionately disciplined for actions that may be seen as minor for their peers, they are then often deprived of valuable classroom time and learning opportunities. This pattern reinforces the perception that Black girls are 'troublemakers' in the classroom, or 'disruptive', which leads educators to then overlook their academic potential and needs.

Additionally, the pressure to conform to restrictive expectations can lead Black girls to feel the need to suppress themselves, which further limits their engagement and willingness to participate openly in class. This constant scrutiny and discipline not only disrupts their learning in the classroom, but also impacts Black girls' self-esteem and sense of belonging in educational spaces, making it significantly more difficult for them to fully benefit from their education.

With the disparities faced by students of color and women identifying individuals in mind, it is perhaps important to note the other side. It is, of course, necessary for those not affected by gender and race biases to acknowledge that they are not affected by these factors in their academic careers in order to begin any lasting change. In light of this, it is important to note various areas of privilege, especially in relation to education experiences. Dr. Peggy McIntosh, an American anti-racist activist compiled a list of statements that present some daily effects of having white privilege, that could be useful in this application. Some of these statements include that "when I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is...I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race...I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race," (McIntosh 2-3). In the case of racial bias, white people must accept and acknowledge these facts. White individuals must recognize a gap and pattern, and actively speak out against these systematic patterns.

In the case of gender bias, similar considerations apply. Men in education can be sure that their history books will include people of their same gender in power, and can be sure that they will not be looked down upon for their gender in the classroom. So, why would a white man want to address these factors that leave his BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and

female peers systematically behind? Cynthia Sutanto, a paralegal for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, examined how white men in particular can benefit from acknowledging their privilege. Sutanto notes prior to listing benefits to recognition that "gender equality cannot be realized until people become aware that inequality exists," (1). Creating safe spaces for men and women identifying individuals alike first begins with acknowledgment of disparities. While there is no one specific remedy to approach one's own participation in any form of oppression, Sutanto suggests that centering reconciliation and healing around joy and positive outlooks of masculinity can be beneficial (1). After this fact, it can be found that acknowledging disparities can lead to safer communities, and potentially ones that uphold models of healthy masculinity (Sutanto 1). This can then lead to less violence-prone communities. Furthermore, Sutanto found that white male identifying individuals acknowledging their privilege can hold space for men to speak out against harm that they have experienced under the patriarchy. By recognizing their privilege, white men can become active allies in promoting equality in the classroom, and can benefit by hearing a variety of diverse approaches to their classroom work. This self-awareness helps dismantle the systemic biases that disadvantage BIPOC and female students. Additionally, this can help to enrich white men's own lives by encouraging healthier, more empathetic perspectives on gender and power.

My research works to shed light on the entrenched racial and gender biases in the American educational system that disproportionately harm students of color and women-identifying students. However, more research is essential to fully understand and address these complex and intersecting biases. Future research on related subjects could expand on the experiences of other marginalized groups, such as LGBTQIA+ students, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities, whose voices also deserve consideration in the fight to level the

educational playing field. Additionally, exploring regional and economic disparities could provide additional insight into factors such as classroom resources, and how these factors disproportionately affect students of color. As we acknowledge these deep-rooted biases, it is essential to continue to increase awareness and intervention methods to bring further inclusivity and representation to the field of education. In doing so, we can begin to dismantle the barriers that have historically restricted marginalized voices of People of Color and non male individuals, working towards an equal educational system where all students are seen, valued, and supported in reaching their full potential regardless of their racial and gender identity.

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