

Kindergarten to PhD: How Anti-Black Racism Shaped My Educational Experiences

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Abstract: I was introduced to anti-Black racism and robbed of my childhood innocence very early in my academic journey. From kindergarten through the completion of my doctorate degree, I have had to manage my responses to and navigate a system built to sustain White supremacy while seeking academic excellence. In this narrative, I share some of the barriers and triumphs of my educational journey. The lack of inclusion I constantly dealt with led me to question my abilities and self-worth. My current scholarship serves as an opportunity to intervene and disrupt these oppressive systems so others can potentially have more equitable experiences. Over several decades and a variety of professional and personal experiences impacted by anti-Black racism, I am working towards dismantling White supremacy within social work education. Finally, I proffer ways in which individuals and institutions can work to commit to anti-racism policies and practices.

Keywords: equity in education, inclusive cultures, tenacity, cultural sensitivity, White supremacy

In the Beginning...

My first experience with race and racism was in kindergarten. I didn't have the language or understanding as to what was going on, but I can still remember how different I felt. My teacher, who was White, was handed a slip with my name on it as we were introduced. She turned to me and pointedly said, "I am never going to be able to spell your name." I replied that I didn't need her to teach me how to spell my name because I could do so independently. When I think about this, I am always grateful to my mother for having the insight to know my name could be a way for others to mistreat me, so she was proactive. I arrived reading and writing and extremely self-sufficient to the start of my education experience. The cold and agitated response from my teacher was my introduction to the isolation and hostility that often came with being a Black student in a predominantly White institution (PWI). Over the years I would face many microaggressions. Huber & Solorzano (2015) define microaggressions as subtle, automatic, and unconscious predominately verbal assaults that cumulatively take an academic, physiological, and psychological toll on their victims.

The intentional mispronunciation of my first name was the most common microaggression I faced. I would correct people and spell my name phonetically, yet there were often letters added or removed when I was called upon. I began to resent my name. I was growing up in the era of Heather, Amanda, and Jennifer being the most popular names in my classrooms. I yearned for a name that would allow people to accurately and easily identify me. By third grade, I decided I would begin to use my middle name because it was more simple. I decided on the first day of school going forward I would ask my instructors and classmates to address me by my middle name. At nine years old, I thought I had found a solution that would allow me to feel "normal" while attending this PWI. Once I changed my name, I felt more included as a student, but it

would not be long before I once again felt targeted and distant from my classmates.

I began to stand out academically, and most of the students did not respond well to this achievement. I was often teased and taunted because of my outstanding grades and the way some teachers would use me as the standard for behavior and academic excellence. I would ask my teachers not to make a big deal of my performances. I was often held up like the most amazing student because I was bused in from a lower-performing school district, not simply because I was performing well. It was as if most of the administrators could not believe I was capable of excelling. In both first and second grade, I was offered an opportunity to skip a grade to get me more challenging instruction. My mother refused to allow me to accept these double advancements out of fear I would not be as mature as my classmates. I would hold a grudge towards her for some time, as I saw this opportunity as a way to once again be average and blend in with others. I would always say to myself that I could cut back and get more wrong answers and lower my grades, but that never set well with me. My family expected me to excel, and it was important to me to always do my best.

When I was commencing from fifth grade into middle school, I won the top spot for the Presidential Academic Honors. There was controversy before the ceremony because a Black girl was winning the award, but my mother put an end to all of that immediately. My mother had a conference with the school principal and guidance counselor. They reviewed my transcript although this had been done by my teacher, and it was determined that I had the top academic performance of my peers for grades K-5. The parents of my peers were assured that, after further review, I was indeed the top pupil, and the ceremony went forward without further incident. This was a situation where no one ever explicitly said they could not understand how a Black child had outperformed their White child, but my mother and I both knew what we had experienced.

In sixth grade, there was a moment that led me to wanting to change back to using my first name. A teacher had found a note that was signed with my middle name and assumed it was written by me. This was my advanced math teacher and this class only had two Black students: my close friend and me. In front of my classmates, and close friend, my teacher verbally assaulted me for something I knew nothing about. I don't remember all the specifics, but in essence her point was until Black students stopped fighting to resolve disagreements, we would never be able to live quality lives. I had never misbehaved in the classroom, and I was one of the top pupils, but at that moment none of this mattered. It did not occur to the teacher that more than one student could be known by the same nickname. I thought if she knew anything about my community, she would know that there were probably three girls called by that name on each block in the inner city where I resided. I was from a two-parent, middle-class home that happened to be in the city that led to me being bused out to a school district with greater resources. Whatever assumptions this teacher had about students who participated in the desegregation program could not have been further from my truth. I was so embarrassed and hurt that I never spoke in her classroom again.

The author of the note was eventually identified, yet my teacher never apologized to me or acknowledged how she had behaved towards me. Once again, I felt attacked and alone. I chose not to tell my parents about this incident because I felt they were often intervening on my behalf,

and I wanted to be able to stand on my own. Additionally, I did not want to be removed from the school and kids I had been with since kindergarten. I felt responsible for managing my experiences on my own. In some ways, I felt that I was protecting my parents from having to engage in what I interpreted to be difficult conversations.

The Formative Years...

This confrontation with my sixth grade teacher changed me in ways it would take me years to understand. Up until that point, I often ignored or made excuses for the way White people treated me, but that was no longer true. I began to feel that White people were awful and I needed to protect myself from them. I listened more intently when they spoke to me. I watched how they moved around me, and I was very cautious when speaking with them. It was draining. I stopped participating in class as much, I cut back on extra-curricular activities, and I wanted to know the racial make-up of all spaces I would enter before arriving. I became obsessed with race and racism. I no longer wanted to read a lot of the young adult books I had explored that had White characters. I was seeking out Black experiences exclusively. This was difficult for several reasons in the early '90s, but change was on the horizon.

I transferred districts for high school and attended a predominantly Black magnet school. I had never gone to school with so many Black students, and it was both comforting and challenging at the same time. It felt amazing to have people correctly pronounce my name; there were many people who listened to the music I enjoyed, who kept up with some of the same current events that interested me, and it was overall easy to show up daily. I was concerned in the beginning because I stood out not because of race but because I spoke differently than most of my peers. I had gone from an environment where my Blackness was often an issue or topic of discussion to not being “Black enough” for some at my new school. An additional layer was that I had a fair complexion, freckles, and naturally red hair in my youth. When the film *Jungle Fever* (Lee, 1991) was released, I had a close friend hold my hand and say we matched the film’s promotional poster. As difficult as it was some days to convince people both my parents were Black, my experiences at this majority Black high school were so much healthier than my time at a PWI.

An Institution on a Mission...

Following an amazing and inclusive high school experience, I chose to attend a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in my city. It turned out that the institution was not a good fit, so I transferred. I loved having all Black professors and classmates and knowing I was a part of a rich history, but I was not satisfied academically. The curriculum lacked rigor, and I felt that I was not being challenged. The major I initially chose was no longer appealing, so I felt it was best to move on. I found myself back at a PWI for undergrad. It wasn’t awful, and there were enough Black students that I found my circle and thrived. Years later, I returned to school to pursue my MSW. Again, I stayed local and attended a school that felt out of reach following high school. Black high schoolers in the area often considered this top-rank research institution to be an ideal fit for wealthy White students from private high schools. This did not include me because I was Black, not wealthy, and a graduate of a struggling public school district. Several

years later, I found myself in the Whitest educational experience I would have to date. I expected more from a school of social work, and an institution situated in such an urban area in a predominantly Black city.

I was working full-time at the same institution as I completed my graduate program, so I knew how low the Black student representation was, but I did expect more in social work and the culture to be healthier. As a new student-support staff member, I was beginning to understand politics and policies in higher education from a non-student perspective. I was supporting students through the Student Support Services TRiO Grant, which aims to ensure low-income and/or first-generation students persist through to graduation. Our institution supported 200 students each academic year and about half of those students were Black, whereas Black students only made up about eight percent of the general student body. I began participating in all campus service opportunities that were attempting to move the needle on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Following some awful anti-Black racism situations involving Greek life, professor interactions, and graffiti around campus, the provost and chancellor responded to the pleas from Black undergraduates by developing a strategic plan dedicated to improving the campus culture and climate around race relations.

As a staff member, I was cautiously optimistic that actual change was going to be prioritized. I knew so often these efforts were more about saying the right thing versus doing the actual work to ignite change. I was so proud of my institution as they hired a vice provost to focus on recruitment and retention of Black faculty members across the campus. Many of the staff-generated affinity groups and diversity initiatives received funding and proper recognition. Resources were allocated to improve representation across the campus, and change was visible. Ten years later, there remains much work to be done, but the institution has several metrics to show what can happen when a desire to change is genuine, prioritized, and properly financed. After eight years of supporting the campus community—more specifically, the Black undergraduate students—I was ready to take on similar challenges at another institution that stated it was ready to make similar strides.

Higher Education Lip Service...

I decided it would be a great idea to take on new challenges by changing institutions. I believed that the more campuses I could help begin their journey towards equity and inclusion, the greater my overall impact would be on healthy cultures in higher education. According to Parsons et al. (2018), institutions that evolve beyond passive, independent system-wide or department-level policies around diversity and inclusion to actively solving problems simultaneously at the departmental and institutional levels will achieve greater success with improving their cultures and climates. Unfortunately, I had accepted a role with an institution that had not reached the evolution Parsons, et al. spoke of, but they were deceitful in presenting themselves as such. I was hired to split my time between diversity initiatives and international programming. It made perfect sense on paper, and I was told the administration was committed to change at the request of both students and faculty members.

After only two weeks into my new role, I realized I had made a grave mistake. The institution

was not genuinely interested in changing the culture. I was hired to give a false impression that the institution was committed to change, but it was just lip service. They were beginning to say many of the right things, but they weren't actually interested in doing the work. In my first two months on the job, a climate survey had been developed and administered in partnership with a local diversity organization. Upon analysis of the data, the responses to the open-ended questions highlighted just how toxic the environment was for some of the Black students. Due to our experience with micromanagement by the college president, my supervisor and I thought it would be best to allow him to review this data before publishing our findings in publicly available reports. He stated we were prevented from disclosing any open-ended responses, and limited us to producing a one-page report. I was completely devastated; I realized I had been censored and would not survive the toxic culture of the institution for long. I had worked in challenging organizations before, but never had I been told to sit still and be quiet.

In addition to limiting the climate survey, I was instructed to end all diversity-related activities for the foreseeable future. I later found out that a few alumni were not pleased with diversity and inclusion being prioritized and threatened to end their donations to the college. This financial threat resulted in me sitting idly in my office for 18 months twiddling my thumbs. I was miserable and regretted leaving my previous institution. I had to figure out how to cope with my budget being eliminated, as well as my instructions to sit and wait until things settled down. While I was not allowed to plan events or engage directly in diversity and inclusion initiatives, I used my time on campus to partner with other units who had more autonomy to help shape campus activities. Additionally, with this vital work being postponed, I developed a few presentations for national conferences as a coping mechanism. The effect of my positions swiftly changing from intentionally hearing the voices of students to improve their experiences to not working at all took a toll on my physical well-being. I was dealing with chronic headaches, depression and anxiety, and random panic attacks. Not only was I dealing with this, but I believed I had let down the Black students who were so enthusiastic about my arrival. The worst part of my experience was the expectation to recruit students of color without simultaneously working to ensure they had an inclusive experience should they attend the institution. During the recruitment season of my second year in this position, I was sent to Atlanta to recruit students from Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Clark Atlanta University.

During my MSW program and time as a staff member at my previous institution, I had realized the power that faculty held on campus, and the many ways in which academic freedom could be used to influence higher education cultures. Accepting my commitment toward equity and inclusion, I considered obtaining a PhD. I believed that having more buy-in would allow me to be instrumental in the changes I hoped to see and know students deserved. However, I did not always feel capable of completing this task. Part of this hesitation was due to not having a Black female faculty member throughout my graduate studies and realizing there were only a handful of Black women faculty members across my entire university. I had experienced some of the barriers to doing this work as a staff member and was not certain that joining faculty would lead to the results I expected.

It was during this recruitment trip to Atlanta that I was completely honest with myself and decided I could no longer be guided by fear. Much like in my childhood years, I was afraid that

while I had done well academically, I would not rise to the occasion and complete a doctoral program. I knew many people who had enrolled in doctoral studies and stopped once reaching the “all-but-dissertation” phase of the program. I thought it was best to not start rather than to have to eventually quit. All of these thoughts were running through my mind, but I was able to complete the task at hand. I interacted with students and recruiters from all over, but I did not try to influence one student to attend the college I was representing. I shared the facts of the institution and fulfilled my job duties, but I was very honest about the lack of diversity and inclusion and how I did not expect change in the short-term. When I returned to my hotel, I realized the time was now to pursue my doctorate and change my approach to diversifying higher education.

The Art of “Othering” ...

During my two-year tenure at the PWI that was not prepared to authentically engage in creating an anti-racist culture, I was able to develop relationships with some of the Black women students. I was able to informally mentor these students and support events they organized through the Black Student Association we revamped. It was through these students and my time as a graduate student that I grew more interested in the specific experiences of Black women in higher education. In the fall of 2015, I began my doctoral studies at the PWI where I had worked for eight years and completed my MSW. Based on my prior experiences with the institution, I knew that diversity continued to be a challenge, but the school had made great strides in creating an inclusive culture. Still, I was not prepared to be the only Black member of my cohort of 13 students, which was a large cohort within a school of social work. There had been several Black prospective students present on interview day. Of course, I have no way of knowing who received offers and who declined said offers, but I would discourage institutions from having a single member of a demographic group in a cohort whenever possible. Thankfully, there were Black women students in cohorts ahead of mine, but it was not the same because they were at very different points in the program from myself.

Reflecting on my time as a MSW student and now a doctoral student, I committed to using my scholarship to draw attention to what Collins (2002) noted as justification for race, gender, and class oppression by way of frequent images of Black women as “other.” I struggled nearly daily with “imposter syndrome” throughout my graduate studies. I felt I was granted admission because I had previously attended the institution for my MSW and because I had been a staff member. I thought of countless reasons that I was admitted to the program except for my academic record, adjunct teaching experience, and commitments to scholarship and teaching. Being the only Black member of my cohort also caused me to consider that I may have been fulfilling some sort of minority- or diversity-driven quota. When minority students are seen as not fitting in, this may lead to faculty and administration misinterpreting their behaviors as lacking interest, hostile, uncommitted, or unable to be successful in their studies, while the students may be working to manage the racialized stress related to the experience of being “other” (Weng & Gray, 2017). I was afraid to speak up in class most days out of fear that an incorrect answer would haunt me through the entire program. Whenever the opportunity was available, I took courses in other disciplines to increase the likelihood that I would not be the only Black student in the course. These experiences helped shape my interest in better

understanding if others felt similarly and, if so, how they were coping. This led me to study Black women scholars' experiences through the prisms of imposter syndrome and authenticity in schools of social work. It is this feeling of being "other" that can lead to these scholars having to manage their responses to both internal and external racism. I expected more from social work, as had others.

At the start of my third year in my doctoral program, I only visited campus as needed. I had healthy enough relationships with members of my cohort, but many of our discussions evolved into brainstorming sessions for their research agendas or therapy sessions for problems in their personal lives. I was on average ten years older than most members of my cohort and a great listener, but it began to feel as though I was being used to fulfill a "mammy" stereotype. Collins (2002) defines a mammy as a faithful, obedient domestic servant who places the needs of her White employers above her own. Though the dynamics were not identical, I definitely felt the interactions with several members of my cohort mirrored this behavior, resulting in me rendering myself unavailable. While disappearing solved one problem, it created more feelings of isolation and loneliness that allowed my experiences with imposter syndrome to increase.

I was selected for a fellowship at my institution that seeks to diversify the professoriate by funding underrepresented doctoral students. It was within this community that I felt most supported, safe, and empowered. I was surrounded with mostly Black students from all disciplines, with whom I developed long-standing relationships. I attribute much of my success to this program, as it was a constant reminder that I could complete the journey. We had annual meetings with program alumni, professional development funds, and opportunities to present our research within and beyond the campus community. Much of what I was not receiving within the School of Social Work was provided by this campus-wide initiative. It would serve universities well as they begin to prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion to factor in transdisciplinary support, because most departments at a college will likely have limited representation. This is a way by which students can have greater access to faculty members of color and other potential mentors.

The Power of the Pen...

As previously stated, after two years of struggling my way through feelings of isolation and loneliness as a doctoral student, I decided to change my research agenda to focus on eradicating White supremacy from social work education. My research specifically centers on the voices of Black women faculty and doctoral students in schools of social work. When I made the decision to change research directions, I was met with a great deal of resistance. I was told the population was not one many would be interested in learning more about. One advisor said the representation of Black women faculty was so small I would not be able to have a solid power analysis. Finally, I was told that qualitative research was not as rigorous as quantitative research, and I would struggle to obtain a job upon graduating. These comments all came before I had fully flushed out my thoughts, while I was just casually mentioning a change in my focus. Initially I thought about listening to those who were in positions of power and influence and selecting a different research area. In all honesty, I was heartbroken and ready to walk away from it all. Instead, I dug in my heels and decided this was exactly the work I needed to be

doing; I needed to show people how different the experiences of Black women in higher education could be in comparison to their counterparts.

The reactions to my interests affirmed what I already knew to be true: Not many social work researchers were interested in discussions surrounding race, equity, diversity, or inclusion. I was honestly hurt as one of the faculty members who wrote a letter of recommendation into the program had waved off my interest as if it were a complete waste of time. This was a White man who I previously believed to be an ally and now I was having to question our relationship. My advisor at the time was a Black man. He also was not supportive of this line of inquiry, making it clear to me that as a Black woman, my experiences were not only unique but potentially invisible to others. It was difficult for me to stand firm in my decision initially, because the rejection came from those whose opinions I had trusted and valued for years. However, I eventually found my support system. The advisor I had during my MSW program and a professor I had during the first year of my program agreed to serve as my dissertation chair and she was also excited about my newly identified research topic. She identified as a Black woman social work faculty member and had her own stories about being both invisible and hyper-visible within the school. Through these supports, I received the guidance I needed to complete the arduous task of finishing and defending a dissertation.

Black feminist thought prioritizes empowerment and believes it is essential that Black women intellectuals are committed to advancing the theme of self-definition, because speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment (Collins, 2002). Black feminist thought is the foundation upon which I am building my research agenda. It is my priority to uplift and amplify the voices of Black women in the academy, specifically within social work education. As a discipline charged with ensuring social justice, dignity, and worth of the individual, we need to constantly engage in self-reflection and make sure we are adhering to the National Association of Social Workers (2021) *Code of Ethics* and being true to who we claim to be.

From a very early age, I have been burdened by my race and gender in trying to navigate a world that was created without my needs being considered. I am positioned at the intersection of racism and sexism which means I am often seen as less worthy, less capable, or even invisible to some. Through my scholarship and teaching, I am committed to reducing and/or eliminating barriers for the Black women who follow me in social work education and beyond. The expectations that Black women will survive and thrive while being discriminated against, overlooked for advancement, and overworked have been reinforced by numerous laws and policies (Collins, 2000). The time is now to combat these archaic beliefs and behaviors. I stand on the shoulders of giants, and I am grateful for the opportunity to uplift others along this journey.

Possible Solutions...

Having gone through many racist experiences throughout my education, I would like to proffer a few ways in which institutions and individuals can better interact with Black students. It's actually quite simple, but I believe people like to give the impression that it is difficult to absolve themselves of responsibility. This work can be done with simple research and genuine effort.

There are countless free-of-charge resources devoted to exploring implicit bias and discrimination, along with equity and inclusion. A simple internet search can lead to many tools such as book clubs, webinars, podcasts, and curriculums that can be used for course development, professional development trainings, and/or personal growth. While these resources have been available for years, their accessibility has multiplied tremendously following the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests against racism in the United States.

The responsibility must fall on individuals and organizations to engage in self-reflection and commit to ending anti-Black racism, both systemically and individually. I could never recall every racist interaction I have experienced, but collectively it has led to a state of exhaustion from the burden of navigating White supremacy in spaces that should be safe for members of all communities. At such an early age, Black children lose their innocence, as they are often taught early the responsibilities tied to remaining safe while navigating White supremacy. It would be ideal if White children were being taught early how to behave in anti-racist ways to reduce the burden on Black children. I believe we have much work to do before this is normalized, but it should be the goal.

Here are a few more suggestions to move the needle on matters of anti-racism and dismantling White supremacy, specifically in the classroom. First, it is important to make an honest effort when pronouncing a student's name. This is a sign of respect and shows interest in the student as an individual. Throughout history, most of us have learned to pronounce all types of names from creators of classical music, art, and literature from a variety of cultures; therefore, we should also learn to correctly pronounce the names of people we interact with in person. It is also important to make sure each student feels that you, the teacher, believe they can succeed, and that you are committed to helping them reach their full potential. Students should not be made to be representatives of their race; instructors should encourage "I" statements, so students are only speaking of their individual lived experiences. These are some ways we can prevent biases from negatively influencing the relationships being cultivated within educational settings.

Additionally, educational institutions—from elementary to secondary school as well as at the post-secondary level—should make every effort to prevent situations where there is only one student of color in a class or cohort. I recognize this will not always be possible, but it should be given serious consideration. Identifying as a Black person is not a monolithic experience, so this is not to imply these students will always get along or support one another, but at least they will have representation. Increasing representation of faculty and staff should also be a priority. It is important that students of color have an opportunity to engage with people who share some of their identities. This can serve as a source of confidence and inclusion for these students who may otherwise feel uncomfortable and out of place.

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