

EXPLORING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES FROM AN URBAN COMMUNITY NAVIGATE THE INTERRACIAL AND INTRA-RACIAL DIMENSIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES AT AN URBAN JESUIT HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

African American males from urban communities have been attending Jesuit high schools in urban spaces for many years, yet little to no literature exists that explores their experiences while attending these elite private schools. This qualitative study of 10 African American males from an urban community attending a similarly positioned Jesuit high school on the East Coast revealed their struggles with both inter- and intra-racial dimensions of their experiences. This paper explores their challenges with racist comments within the interracial context and their understandings of ‘acting White’ within the intra-racial context.

Keywords: African American Males, Jesuit High Schools, Inter-racial and Intra-Racial Interactions, Urban Schools

As portions of the larger society have tended to view urban African American males with “some degree of dissonance and trepidation” (Spencer, 2001, p. 103), the quality of life for many has hovered near the bottom in the United States. Framed by their overrepresentation in the prison system and consistent racial profiling by law enforcement officials (Parks & Hughey, 2010), high rates of illiteracy, and elevated infection rates of HIV/AIDS (Anderson & Simmons, 2010; Zamani-Gallaher & Polite, 2010), their experiences in urban public school systems have been no better. Situated amidst their disproportionate placement in special education or remedial reading courses, higher rates of suspensions and expulsions than other race males, underrepresentation in gifted or advanced courses, graduation rates as low as 27% in the Detroit Public Schools (Kincheloe, 2007; Polite & Davis, 1999; Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002), and similar data associated with attending and graduating from colleges and universities (Rowley & Bowman, 2009; Toldson, Brown, & Sutton, 2009), far too many urban African American males are being rendered obsolete by our educational system.

In an effort to counteract the negative experiences and poor academic outcomes associated with the educational experiences of many urban African American males, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), a religious order of the Catholic Church, has devoted an extensive amount of its energy to educating these young men. To many, Jesuit high schools are considered to be elite private schools that have a significant population of

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upper middle class White students. However, based on the insistence of St. Ignatius, the Society of Jesus founder, that all Jesuits commit to serving the oppressed and disenfranchised (Scibilia, Giamario, & Rogers, 2009), a focus on urban African American males aligns well with their mission. By using the Jesuit secondary education model to emphasize the importance of schooling to the formation of character, along with the desire to integrate both the humanistic need to serve others with the scholastic need to excel academically (O'Malley, 1989), the Jesuit Secondary Education Association (JSEA) and its member schools have sought to recruit and retain urban African American males.

Widely recognized for their students' attendance at elite colleges and universities in addition to graduation rates that exceed 95 percent, Jesuit high schools have spawned the careers of a number of successful African American alumni (Wirth, 2007). When one considers previously discussed social and education data related to urban African American males, it would seem as if Jesuit high schools could provide a positive academic outcome for them. Fenzel (2009) and Kearney (2008) would certainly agree with this assertion based on their work on Jesuit secondary schools in eight urban cities. However, their attention to this matter did not include an examination of the experiences of African American males at the traditional Jesuit high schools, which have largely White student populations. In an effort to fill that gap in the literature and respond to York's (1996) call for more research on "smaller, more discrete populations in Catholic schools" (p. 13), this paper explores the experiences of African American males from an urban community who are attending an urban Jesuit high school along the East Coast of the United States. As such, the guiding question for this study is "How do African American males from an urban community describe their inter- and intra-racial experiences at an urban Jesuit high school?"

Method

In an effort to explore the experiences of African American male students from an urban community who are attending a Jesuit high school, a qualitative study was implemented. Although data reflect the number of African Americans attending Catholic schools (NCEA, 2010), this qualitative project is designed to go beyond the numerical placement of the students (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and embrace York's (1996) suggestion that more research should be conducted on specific populations attending Catholic schools. By using a phenomenological mode of inquiry, this study aims to explore how these students describe their inter- and intra-racial experiences at a traditional Jesuit high school in an urban city along the East Coast of the United States. Considering the positionality of the Black students at a mostly White Jesuit high school in an urban community, phenomenology fits perfectly with my goal of discovering and exposing their experiences while also allowing the students to examine their own thinking and interpretations of those experiences (Lynn, 2006). It is not the intention of this study to claim that all African American students similarly positioned will have the same experiences or understandings. Rather, the phenomenological framework utilized in this study allows for an extensive understanding of the "experience-rich participants of this study" (Gorski, 1998, p. 59) while also acknowledging multiple interpretations of situations that might be connected by similar life conditions or experiences (Bogdan & Belkin, 1999).

Setting

Green Jesuit High School (GJHS), a pseudonym, is located on the East Coast of the United States. Founded in the early 1800s by members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), the school has 950 male students enrolled in grades 9 through 12. Of the 950 students, African American students comprise 10 percent of the student population. Admitting one third of the students who apply and noted in various publications as the premiere Catholic school in the metropolitan area, GJHS has developed a reputation as a top-notch academic institution that is an athletic powerhouse in football, basketball, lacrosse, crew, and rugby.

Participants

The primary method for locating participants was purposeful sampling (McMillan & Shumacher, 2001). After communicating with the president of the school, it was determined that the faculty sponsor of the Black Student Union (BSU) would be the primary point of contact. By sorting through the school's database to identify students who self-identified as African American, we determined that 30 11th and 12th graders would be contacted. Of the 30 11th and 12th graders, 10 returned the appropriate consent forms and agreed to participate. The participants in this study were all African American males who lived in the city. Their median grade point average was 2.7 on a 4.0 scale. Each of the participants participated in two or more activities, and all of the participants identified athletics (basketball, football, and track) and the Black Student Union as their most significant activities.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

All of the participants participated in an in-depth, one-on-one interview; six participants also participated in two separate focus groups as a follow-up task. Each interview lasted no longer than 60 minutes while the focus groups lasted no longer than 90 minutes. All of the interactions with the participants were recorded and subsequently transcribed prior to analysis. Once text was transcribed, the primary researcher reviewed participants' responses several times. Instead of looking only for frequency in themes, the primary researcher looked for underlying meaning in participants' responses. The text was further reviewed for contrasts and comparisons in the wording. A comprehensive list of master themes was generated from this process, and the themes identified from this portion of the data analysis were discussed with an independent auditor at several points. The auditor made suggestions for revision of some of the themes.

Data for this study were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) due to the need to explore how the participants generate meaning from their experiences in schools by focusing on their thoughts and perceptions. The goal of this data analysis was to explore the processes through which participants make meaning from their lived experiences. Utilizing an immersion strategy, the primary researcher was able to make assessments and judgments based on "intuitive and interpretive capacities" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 155). As such, a deeper understanding of the subject matter was obtained while also providing opportunities to reframe understandings of the students' experiences.

Findings

Negotiating race at GJHS starts at home. When looking back on their decision to attend the school, all of the participants revealed that their parents made sure that they recognized that they were entering a very different world from their neighborhoods. Having lived in all-African American neighborhoods and considering the historical racial divide in the city and metropolitan region, five of the ten students were given explicit instructions to “always be on guard for the racism that gets thrown your way” (Marcus, Personal communication, March 15, 2011). For the others, their parents indicated that they “weren’t there to worry about the white folks and any issues with race, they were there to get an education” (John, Personal communication, March 15, 2011). With these conversations firmly planted into their minds, all 10 participants in this study stepped into GJHS as freshman with a sense of “excitement,” “nervousness,” and “hesitation.” Nonetheless, there was no backing out. As one of the students explained:

My parents don’t play about education and they knew that GJHS was the best place for me. So when I complained about this or that, they weren’t interested...they said to figure it out because you aren’t going anywhere. (Thomas, Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

To understand the navigation of race at GJHS, two categories of interactions emerged as important: inter-racial and intra-racial.

Interracial Interactions

Representing a small percentage of the student body, all of the students in the study shared their numerous experiences as the only African American student from the city in numerous classes. The significance of this situation was animated when issues of race were brought up in class or when White students made broad generalizations about the city. Although lacking in agreement as to whether White students’ negative comments were racist or a result of bias, they all agreed that being the only African American student from the city in a class was a challenge.

The other day someone made the comment about people in the city only getting welfare and how some of them don’t even need it. I wanted to say something but I just didn’t feel like wasting my energy. (Ricky, Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

My biggest challenge is when the teacher looks at me when slavery comes up in world history. I’m looking at the teacher like don’t even think of calling on me but this dude did. Not only did he call on me but he asked if we talked about slavery at home. (Matt, Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

As their experience with interracial situations extended beyond the classroom, the 12th graders expressed frustration with the “acting Black” phenomenon that had played out during their four years of attendance at GJHS. Noting the ways in which White students adopted an “acting Black” demeanor whereby “fake Black person slang and saying things

like ‘yo what up dog’” (Rodney, Personal communication, March 14, 2011) became normative, the inter-racial tension was escalated. Furthermore, comments by White students in which they “jokingly called me homeboy or bro” (Rodney, Personal communication, March 14, 2011) resonated with all of the participants. However, two of the students indicated that these statements bothered them especially when they included the word “nigga.”

Sometimes they’ll walk up to you and you think they are going to talk to you and you wait for the conversation to start and they say stuff like ‘you better watch it boy’ and then you say, ‘man, stop playing with me’ and then you laugh it off. Or else they’ll come up to you and be like, ‘what’s up my nnn-.’ They’ll like stop there. (John, Personal communication, March 15, 2011)

The challenge of dealing with these types of issues is in determining an appropriate response.

Lamar struggled with lashing out either physically or verbally, yet Herman suggested that he ‘is there to get an education, not deal with racist white boys’. (Personal communication, March 14, 2011)

Intra-Racial Interactions

The two different perspectives on how to respond to perceived racist comments were similar to the students’ understanding of the intra-racial issue of acting White. As some of the students in the study perceived acting White as nonsense and “Black folks needing to expand their horizons” (Marquin, Personal communication, March 15, 2011); others offered a more scathing critique. Using language like “Uncle Tom,” “sell outs,” and “oreos,” it was quite obvious that notions of “acting White” are a serious point of contention within the African American community at GJHS.

As the students looked for ways to discern what it means to act White, the tension between themselves and their suburban counterparts emerged. Lucian suggested that many of the African American guys from the suburbs had been “blinded to the reality of being Black” (Personal communication, March 14, 2011) because of their financial privilege. Marquin contextualized his experience through a discussion in class.

This one white kid told me that ‘no one’s racist and that no one cares about race.’ I was looking at this dude like he was crazy. But the funny thing was that the Black kid who was in the class agreed and believed that Black people are too sensitive about race. (Personal communication, March 15, 2011)

This interaction—and the strained relationship—provides some context for the most revealing display of segregation in the school: the cafeteria and the school’s common area (above the cafeteria, similar to a student lounge). Looking back as 11th and 12th graders, the participants admitted that the African American kids from the city always sat at their own table in the lunchroom and in the common area. This physical display of segregation in an integrated school had no rhyme or reason according to the students. According to Marcus, “it has always been that way and I don’t even know why. It just is” (Personal

communication, February 21, 2011). As the others nodded their heads, agreeing with Marcus' comments, Lucian seemed to agree but indicated that he did not adhere to that unwritten rule.

I have like two tables that I usually alternate between. One table, which is all Black; then I have another table which is I'd say half Black, some mixed race kids, and maybe three or four White guys. (Personal communication, February 21, 2011)

Although Marcus had previously indicated that this arrangement was just happenstance, John and several others believed that this set-up was an intentional effort on the part of the African American kids from the city to find some solace and comfort from those with whom they perceive to have the most in common. In fact, this arrangement—or the fact that it is available to those who choose not to participate every day—provides a “safe place to kick it without feeling like we're going to be judged on how much money we have, where we are going on vacation at—cause most of us ain't going to Switzerland to ski” (Matt, Personal communication, February 21, 2011).

Discussion

The daily interactions between White students and their suburban African American peers at GJHS indicate that the students in this study are navigating bifurcated notions of racial interactions—both inter- and intra-racial. As their experiences associated with the inter-racial interactions are situated within an understanding of racial micro-aggressions, their sense of community and safety associated with sitting at the “Black table” in the cafeteria cannot be entirely unexpected. As “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities” (Sue et al., 2008, p. 72), racial micro-aggressions can be psychologically damaging or force African Americans into isolation, with additional feelings of “self-doubt and frustration” (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2009, p. 69). As a result, their retreat to the safety of their African American peer group is very much aligned with Murrell's (2007) situated-mediated identity theory. By trying to find ways to “inoculate themselves against the ubiquitous assaults on their identity” (Murrell, 2007, p. 26), the short-term result is a positive feeling of safety and—as one of the students stated—“when I'm around my own people I can do me” (Marcus, Personal communication, March 15, 2011). Although Spencer (2001) suggested that these types of coping strategies might “exacerbate an already challenging situation in the long run” (p. 103), the communalism established during their retreat to the cafeteria table, whereby they could share their stories, is their effort to maintain their sense of self in the short run.

With their retreat to the safety of their cafeteria table serving as a response to interracial conflicts, the young people in this study are equally challenged with making sense of the intra-racial relationships between themselves and their same-race suburban counterparts. Although they did admit that they had a “great relationship” with the majority of the suburban African American students, the tension seemed to reside around their understanding of acting White. Similar to the contested space in the literature in which numerous scholars (Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Fryer, 2006) have challenged Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) articulation of the theoretical nature of acting White, the students in this study linked acting White not to academic performance, but to ways of being African

American. In other words, the students in this study articulated a view of African Americans—males in particular—that resonated with their urban experiences. As such, the financial hardships that they mentioned in their families and the various ways that they used slang were assumed to be normative behaviors or economic structures for all African Americans as individuals and families.

The intra-racial dynamics associated with their schooling experience are linked to their understanding of how an African American male should behave. Noting their voice inflection when mimicking their suburban counterparts, it became apparent that diction and intonation played a significant role in determining if students were “from the hood or Black enough” (Herman, Personal communication, March 14, 2011). Although this tension was certainly evident when describing the multiplicity of experiences of African American males at the school, little evidence emerged that the urban and suburban African American students were placed into positions where conflict would be the outcome. In fact, several students endorsed Marcus’ sentiment: “Yeah we might have different ways of talking and places to live, but at the end of the day we are all brothers” (Personal communication, March 15, 2011).

Conclusion

The majority of African American males in urban communities attend public schools, yet those who attend urban Jesuit schools seem to be in an environment where graduating is a foregone conclusion and attending college is not only a viable option, but the expectation. Despite this academic outcome at the majority of Jesuit high schools, little to no research has been conducted on their individual experiences at these schools. This paper sought to assist in filling this void. Based on the findings, Jesuit schools would do well to ensure that professional development for the staff include relevant conversations related to cultural competency as well as explicit dialogue about the lives of the urban youth recruited to attend the school within the Jesuit ideals professed by St. Ignatius—a commitment to serving the oppressed and disenfranchised (Scibilia et al., 2009). Furthermore, the students in this study demonstrated significant resilience in dealing with racial micro-aggressions, yet they never revealed how the school has changed as a result of their presence and racialized experiences. Thus, perhaps the question is not how do these students understand their experiences and make meaning of them, but rather how future research should focus more on ways that Jesuit schools in urban communities can embrace a true social justice mission, as expressed by St. Ignatius and other members of the Jesuit community who have given their lives in the quest for justice for those who have been marginalized by the larger society.

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