



Intersectionality of Equality in Educational Settings Through the Lens of Gender, Race, and Disability

Siyu Zeng^(✉)

Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development,
New York University, New York, NY 10003, USA
sz2849@nyu.edu

Abstract. It is important to make sure every child can receive an equal education at school. However, this is not always the case. Some groups of children are disadvantaged in educational settings in different ways. Children can be disadvantaged because of their gender (as girls), race (as people of color), and disabilities, but it cannot be sure that they all have the same experience. When gender, race, and disability intersect, it creates more hardships for children; yet their realities are usually invisible. This paper reviews how girls who are also people of color, girls with disabilities, and children with disabilities who are also people of color are facing difficulties that are not widely understood by schools and teachers. If their experiences are not being seen, they cannot receive the services and support they need, which hinders their opportunity and ability to learn. This paper contributes to reviewing the intersectionality of equality in educational settings, which will provide implications for future gender and educational studies.

Keywords: Gender · Race · Disability · Educational Equality

1 Introduction

It is largely acknowledged that children should have equitable educational chances [1]. Education has a tremendous impact on a person's life chances in terms of labor market performance, democratic citizenship preparedness, and overall human fulfillment and wellbeing. When discussing the issue of educational equality, many would examine it through the lens of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. However, these aspects usually overlap and should not be treated separately. This paper focuses on how issues around gender, race, and disability intersect in educational settings and how they affect children's opportunities for equal education. The intersectionality discussed in this paper is the interconnection of gender, race, and disability and the interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage applied to certain groups. For instance, compared to a Caucasian girl, an African-American girl might be disadvantaged at school not only because of her gender but also her identity as people of color. The organization of this paper will be divided into three main sections: gender and race, gender and disability, and race and disability.

2 Gender and Race

Nowadays people are fighting for women's rights collectively and more people started to notice the discrimination women are facing in various aspects of life, but it cannot be assumed that all women share the same level of disadvantages in life. Girls who are also people of color are being placed in vulnerable positions at school. African American girls are often viewed as more educationally resilient compared to their underperforming male counterparts. However, this leads to less attention being paid to African American girls, and educators have less knowledge of the circumstances African American girls are facing. It is true that African American girls outperform African American boys in general both academically and behaviorally, but their high school graduation rate is still significantly lower than girls from other ethnic groups [2]. The better African American girl performs at school, the less attention they will receive. Their difficulties navigating school life are hardly understood by educators, which indicates that their needs would not be incorporated into the pedagogy.

Educators tend to assume or even force African American female students to develop acceptable feminine traits such as passivity and quietness. This often contradicts who they really are and what they really need. Some of the difficulties African American girls face at school might be caused by cultural dissonance. On one hand, African American students need to drop their accents and switch from African American English to General American English at school. On the other hand, different cultures have different expectations of gender roles and notions of femininity. The dissonance would be provoked when the gender norms differ between African American girls and their teachers. To ensure educational equality, culturally responsive pedagogy and gender-specific pedagogy are both critical. Understanding African American female students' circumstance is the first step.

Asian American students, though always deemed to be model minorities due to their outstanding academic performance, also face inequality and are subjected to racism at school. Compared to their African American counterpart, Asian American girls are more invisible at school and their experiences are homogenized. Their heritage and experiences are not being acknowledged and their needs of belonging are not being met [3]. Many Asian American children are children of immigration. Children of immigration must construct identities that will enable them to thrive in different settings, especially in school. Although Asian American children are often strongly motivated to thrive in school and work hard, they are more likely to attend schools that are segregated. They are willing to embrace their American identity, but it is hard for them to become completely indistinguishable from their American peers. Some even feel that doing well in school is a betrayal of their original identity. The quality of their school and the support they receive from teachers are key factors in their transition [4].

Teachers' influence can be really profound and Asian American girls even assume their teachers' persona. This is because Asian American girls have more responsibility at home compared to Asian American boys. They do not have as much opportunity to explore their identity outside of home and school because they are heavily monitored. Thus, school is the only place they can gain social experiences and explore their interests. Asian American girls may have a sense of freedom at school and they view their time at school as more precious than Asian American boys [5]. This further shows the importance

of school education to Asian American girls. Strong academic performance and the title of model minorities are not enough. In fact, calling them model minorities relegated Asian Americans to second-class citizenship and denied them equal citizens [3]. Teachers must understand the experiences of girls who are also people of color in order to provide equal education and help them become who they want to be.

3 Gender and Disability

Children with disability's equal access to education have always been a topic of debate. The disabilities range from intellectual disabilities to physical disabilities and impact children's education in different ways. The debates range from whether children with disabilities should be educated in general education classrooms to how should the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) be made. When the debates on special education intersect with gender, it creates problems such as children of a certain gender are less likely to be correctly diagnosed with certain kinds of disabilities, and children of a certain gender are less likely to have a say in their IEP drafting process. According to The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, girls with disabilities have not enjoyed full human rights on an equal basis with others. They are vulnerable because they remain largely invisible to both women's rights advocates and disability rights advocates. They are facing double discrimination because of their identity as women and as people with disabilities. They are more marginalized and disadvantaged compared to boys with disabilities and girls without disabilities [6].

According to the International Journal for Equity in Health, disabilities are more prevalent among females compared to males across all age groups, yet girls with disabilities do not always receive the diagnostics and supports they need. The consequences for girls who failed to receive services are they are more likely to become teenage mothers, drop out of school, more vulnerable to domestic violence and abuse, and more likely to receive gender-based violence and maltreatment. For years, boys have been over-represented in US special education programs and girls have not received adequate attention. There is no gender gap when it comes to learning disabilities, yet teachers and other school professionals are twice as likely to refer boys for special education services. Boys with learning disabilities are more noticeable to teachers because they show more disruptive behaviors [7]. Even when girls show academic underperformance and struggle with schoolwork, teachers may still not notice their silent cry for help, since academic performance is often not the prioritized factor when teachers refer students for special education. It is unfair to let them face the hardships on their own in the pursuit of education. A school should be the place where every student receives what they need to thrive.

In addition to learning disabilities, neurological developmental disabilities such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are also under-diagnosed among girls [8]. The under-diagnosis of ADHD is because girls display lower levels of hyperactivity and lower rates of externalizing behaviors. If girls with ADHD show behaviors like chatting with friends in class and getting out of their seats to chat with friends, the behaviors are deemed to be normal girls' socializing behavior. If girls with ASD do not talk in class and do not show a lot of physical

movement, they are likely to be labeled as shy and not athletic, which are also deemed as normal girls' traits. Girls with disabilities are homogenized and normalized falsely, which is the main factor why they are more invisible compared to their boy counterparts. Girls are not likely to be noticed until they show similar and even more severe disruptive behaviors as boys. Studies show that girls' perspectives are taken into account more often than boys' are when making their IEPs and the ratio is one in three (girls) versus one in eight (boys) [9]. This implies girls with disabilities need the services that come with their IEPs, but they need help to enter special education programs first. Teachers' role in identifying and referring children with disabilities is crucial, but not all teacher training programs make sure teachers are equipped with such ability. Gender-biased referring process severely hampered educational equality and equal access to services in educational settings.

4 Race and Disability

Apart from gender biases, the education, diagnosis, and support that children with disabilities received are also affected by race. African American children have been over-represented in special education programs for a long time, with a more focus on their behavioral performance and less focus on their academic performance [10]. Teachers' low referral rate of girls with disabilities results in children not receiving the support they need. Meanwhile, teachers' high referral rate of African American children can be stigmatizing, emotionally damaging, and put children at risk of being mislabelled. Ever since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, African American children are more likely to receive an IEP than children from any other ethnicity. However, this does not mean that African American children are always receiving what they need. On the one hand, teachers tend to lower their expectations of students with an IEP, which might result in not enough attention being paid in class and unchallenging coursework being given [11]. Teachers may rely on other professionals on the children's IEP team and the services they receive outside of the classroom and provide inadequate support in the classroom. On the other hand, teachers' stereotypes and cultural biases may influence their decisions when referring children for an IEP. A child's behavior that teachers deemed concerning and must be intervened immediately can be perfectly normal at home.

African American children are likely to be referred for an IEP regardless of whether they have a disability or not [12]. Since children can receive an IEP without a formal diagnosis, children who do have disabilities may not receive a formal diagnosis, and thus fail to receive the service they need. According to the data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, both ADHD and ASD are more prevalent among White children than African American children, which is the opposite of the prevalence of having an IEP. This can be the result of unequal access to care. African American children and children of other racial minorities' access to care are at a much lower rate than White children [13]. Furthermore, African American children are more likely to receive co-concurring diagnoses and more likely to have multiple disabilities. This makes the diagnosing process much longer and more complex. If the correct diagnosis is not received on time, the IEP cannot accurately reflect the educational support a child needs.

In contrast to the overrepresented African American children, Asian American children with disabilities have been underrepresented for a long time. Different factors contribute to this reality. Special education is rarely seen in Asia, and people generally do not have an awareness of developmental disabilities in children. Public understanding of disability is very constrained and is often limited to physical disabilities. Neurological developmental disabilities like ADHD and ASD are not understood and are highly stigmatized in Asia. This stays true in the Asian American community. Parents are likely to have feelings of shame if their children are diagnosed with developmental disabilities, and this perception will pass on to Asian American children [14]. Some parents even deny the existence of developmental disabilities and accuse their children of not working hard enough or accuse the teachers of being incompetent to teach their children. Teachers' referral rate of Asian American children for IEP is low because of the common perception of model minorities. A large amount of Asian American children are well-behaved and have a high academic performance in general, which leads to the small number of children who need help being overlooked. The lack of understanding of developmental disabilities also causes Asian American parents' inability to notice the symptoms of disabilities their children show. Ignored by both parents and teachers, Asian American children are hindered from receiving the educational services they need.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, this paper reviews and analyses the experience of several disadvantaged groups: African American girls, Asian American girls, girls with disabilities, African American children with disabilities, and Asian American children with disabilities in educational settings. African American girls are disadvantaged because they are more invisible compared to their African American boys counterparts. Their hardship in education is hardly seen because the problem with African American boys' academic performance is more obvious and concerning to teachers. Asian American girls are disadvantaged, as they are deemed as model minorities. It is expected that their academic performance should be outstanding and they should not have any behavioral problems. These labels can make their hardship invisible to teachers. Girls with disabilities are disadvantaged because teachers are not as likely to refer girls for IEPs as boys. In this case, teachers tend to be unable to detect signs of girls with disabilities who need help because girls' behaviors (e.g. talking a lot, not talking at all) are simply being classified as "girl traits." Their education would be hampered when they are not receiving the educational support they need. African American children with disabilities are disadvantaged because they are overrepresented in special education. There is a great chance of mislabelling and providing wrong or inadequate support because they can receive an IEP without a formal diagnosis. Asian American children with disabilities are marginalized because they are underrepresented in special education. Because of factors like stigmatization by family culture and teachers' unawareness, Asian American children with disabilities are not likely to be referred to the support they need.

This paper contributes to letting more people, especially educators, understand the experience of children coming from different backgrounds and possessing different identities. When their difficulties become more visible, they are more likely to receive the

support they need, which leads to educational equality. The intersectionality discussed in this paper is only the tip of the iceberg. More followed-up studies are needed on the experience of children with different identities (e.g. American Indian girls, boys with disabilities), and how children's experiences would be impacted when gender, race, and disability intersect together.

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