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Black girls: Adultification & care in school

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The Black Lives Matter movement has led to a wider conversation about Black children's experience in the education system, with a particular focus on the issue of adultification bias. Adultification bias occurs when Black children are regarded as being older than their age (often due to racial stereotypes) and are consequently subjected to unreasonable expectations. There are a large range of multifaceted and interconnected issues that underpin education outcomes among children in care. The experience that Black girls in state care have in the education system often connects with the intersection of them being Black, female and in state care, frequently leading to teachers having an adultification bias towards them.

Adultifying Black girls in state care

Adultification relates to a situation in which adults regard a child as being more mature than their age and therefore holding them to higher standards of judgement. Black girls experience this from their teachers in the form of adultification bias that can lead to them being regarded as angry or manipulative when they are anxious or distressed and to signs of abuse being overlooked. A report published by Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality reflected on Black girls' experience in the foster care system, stating that 'Authorities in this system who view Black girls as more independent and less needing of nurture and protection may assign them different placement or treatment plans from white girls' (Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2017, p. 13). Adultification of this nature is often compounded when it also clouds the experience that the girls have in school with teachers who have similar perspectives.

Black girls' adultification is exemplified in the case of Child Q. Child Q is a Black girl who was a former school prefect who was strip searched by police officers in her academy in Hackney following her academy calling the police as she was accused of using and hiding drugs. Prior to this incident, Child Q's mother had explained that her daughter was anxious about her exams, but this was ignored, culminating in continuous accusations of drug use and a traumatic intimate police strip search while Child Q was menstruating (City of London and Hackney, 2022).

Agenda Alliance's 2021 article on the school experience of Black and minoritised girls stated that (based on data they obtained through an information request to the Department for Education) 'rates of permanent exclusions of girls rose by 66% in the five years prior to the coronavirus pandemic, compared to a rise of 27% for boys'. Agenda Alliance explored some of the causes for this and stated that 'girls and young women have told Agenda that their exclusion often stems from their unaddressed experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, poor mental health, and experiences of racism, with negative stereotypes attached to Black and minoritised girls and young women playing a critical role in their exclusion' (Agenda Alliance, 2021). The complexity that is reflected in the girls' feedback in relation to unaddressed trauma that they have experienced outside and within school, and the role that being Black and female plays in schools' responses, is particularly acute for Black girls in state care. There is an urgent need for schools to focus on including instead of excluding these girls.

Educating the educators

Learning from my research, a trauma-informed approach to teaching is crucial for teachers to support Black girls in state care as they deal with the challenges that they have experienced in their family lives while trying to obtain their qualifications in school. Unfortunately, when working with Black girls in

state care, adultification bias can mean that teaching practice is rooted in racial stereotypes about Black girls. This adultification bias needs to be addressed in the training that teachers receive.

When delivering workshops for teachers (that are aimed at raising their awareness of the adultification of Black girls in education), a common observation that I have made is a lack of awareness of the degree of national academic under-achievement of children in care and of what adultification bias is and how it translates in the classroom. The rich work that some schools are currently doing to implement a trauma-informed school culture needs to include continuous professional development sessions that address the issue of adultification bias towards Black girls who have had an adverse childhood experience, school race task forces (that include Black female and care-experienced teachers) to work on this issue and a greater awareness among teachers of their duty of care under their school's equality and diversity policy. A progressive next step would be for schools to apply initiatives like this with a recognition that Black children are not a monolith and with an appreciation of the multi-layered nature of Black children's identity. This requires a consideration of additional issues such as the challenges that arise from being Black, female and care experienced.

References

Agenda Alliance. (2021). *New data shows Black and minoritised girls more than twice as likely to be excluded*. <https://www.agendaalliance.org/news/new-data-shows-black-and-minoritised-girls-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-be-excluded/>

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