

Book Review

In a Classroom of their Own: The Intersection of Race and Feminist Politics in All-Black Male Schools.

Keisha Lindsay

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

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Keisha Lindsay began by relating the story of an effort in 2010 by Kaleem Caire to establish Madison Preparatory Academy, a publicly funded, all-male school, designed to improve the academic achievement of boys of colour. Although the Madison, Wisconsin, Board of Education denied his petition, the attempt forms the backdrop for Lindsay's dialectical treatise on the views—favourable or unfavourable—on All Black Male Schools (ABMS). Local political conservatives used neoliberal theory to argue for the school. That is, neoliberal theory promised to reduce state control over local schools, embraced mandatory school uniforms, and recognized the financial and educational benefits of hiring non-union teachers. Critics of ABMSs argued that they are detrimental to Black children's psychological, academic, and socioeconomic well-being and denied unconstitutionally children equal access to publicly funded education. In Lindsay's view, single-sex Black schools ignored the needs of Black female adolescents and argue falsely that Black males and Black females learn differently.

Beyond an examination of the pros and cons of ABMS, Lindsay also drew from political theory “with a heavy insistence on practice” (p. 5). Lindsay's own academic background as a professor of gender and women's studies and political science made for a theoretically complex tableau that includes race, gender, and politics. Through this lens, she used the theory of intersexuality, pioneered by Black feminist women such as bell hooks, to interrogate further the opposing opinions on ABMS. But the fluid nature of intertextuality remains, and the question is always which element (e.g., race, gender, or politics) is privileged in the analysis.

Presenting the case for ABMS, Lindsay pointed out the prevailing view that Black boys are disadvantaged, ignored, or dismissed because the teaching force in American schools consists of White teachers (82%) who are unfamiliar with cultural, experiential, or gendered assumptions. Contributing to the racial achievement gap is the evidence that Black boys are much more likely to be placed into special education classes, suspended from school, or drop out of school. In addition to an anti-racist argument for the establishment of such schools, proponents tend also to espouse an antifeminist politics. In reality, Black girls are more likely to be suspended or placed into special education classes than White girls. Moreover, proponents often cite that Black boys do not do as well in mixed classrooms because Black girls, who are overtly sexual, distract them. Portraying Black girls as stereotypical Jezebels who want only to distract Black boys is not supported by evidence; separating boys from girls does not improve their academic performance.

Furthermore, those who identify a “boy crisis” (Farrell & Gray, 2018) believe that boys of all races are more likely to be shunted into special education courses, to underperform on standardized tests, and to underachieve relative to girls of all races. What is the reason? Women teachers have operationalized a feminized classroom.

The author’s hope, as expressed in the introduction, is that a compromise might be struck whereby disadvantaged groups can ignore the lack of an existing experiential claim and build an antiracist and feminist political coalition. As it is, this goal is not about specifying particular pedagogical, curricular, or disciplinary politics in the nation’s schools. Rather, it is to encourage Black male supporters of ABMS and the feminists who criticize them to “navigate the contradictory politics associated with their appeals to experience when they use accessible, community based spaces—from barbershops to public libraries—to do so” (p. 17). As a result, taxpayer-funded schools could be maintained and provide an important means of addressing the very oppression that inferior public schools perpetuate. With the goal of fostering democracy, public schools could enable Black students to redefine democracy and their place in society.

In chapter one, “Choice, Crisis, and Urban Endangerment,” the author went into greater detail in regard to the “boy crisis” and the reason that supporters of ABMS have fallen into league with that theory. That is, that single-gender schools help to address the dilemma of fatherless households. In addition, some proponents of ABMS argue that the absence of father figures makes boys act up and consider school to be worthless. This argument, however, ignores the fact that gender and/or race discrimination in the labour force denies equal wages to female-headed households. Another concern is the historical emasculation of Black boys and men, whereby they are deprived of their intellectual power and voice. Reform efforts begun in American colleges and universities in the 1980s drew attention to White, male, and European curricular biases. Educational philosopher Diane Ravitch and others have concurred that urban schools offer a Eurocentric curriculum and perpetuate assessment and disciplinary measures that are biased against Black children.

In chapter two, “Antiracist, Antifeminist Intersectionality,” Lindsay examined the core claim of ABMS supporters that “black boys underachieve because they are forced to learn in racist, over-feminized classrooms—is actually based on the Black feminist-inspired, intersectional notion that race and gender-based oppression are mutually constructing” (p. 53). She reminded the reader, however, of the fluid nature of intersectionality. In other words, intersectionality’s underlying logic does not intentionally privilege certain spheres such as race or gender nor does it demonstrate how to relieve oppression. It is, rather, a tool to make political arguments about one’s own and others’ status. Supporters of ABMS often use intersectionality to make simultaneous antifeminist and antiracist arguments. Black boys are oppressed because they are taught in racist classrooms that are overtly feminist. She also pointed out that although feminist theorists of intersectionality focused traditionally on the relationship among race, gender, and sexuality, there is nothing that mandates a focus on these particular categories rather than, for example, age, religion, and ethnicity, and how they gain meaning from each other.

In chapter three, “The Double Dialectic between Experience and Politics,” the author claimed that “it is impossible to articulate a politically unmediated grasp or knowledge of experience” (p. 81). The implication is that Black male supporters of ABMS make claims about their own and other Black males’ experience of oppression in ways that advance antiracist politics and are informed by antifeminist politics. These claims make it difficult to posit any kind of unmediated experiential claim about Black boys or other disadvantaged groups. Therefore, the appeal to experience is limited because the assertions about one’s own experience both engender

emancipatory politics and are informed by oppressive politics. Furthermore, antifeminist politics in the hands of supporters of the ABMS can go so far as to say that White women teachers harm Black boys not only because they are White, but also because they are female. This dynamic is blamed for being the reason why so many Black boys ultimately write off academic achievement as a White feminine value and pursue unrealistic non-academic goals like professional sports and the entertainment industry. At the end of the chapter, the author posed this question: “In what circumstances, if any, are disadvantaged social groups most likely to acknowledge that their experiential claims both resist and perpetuate gendered and other forms of oppression?” (p. 99). In the next chapter, she interrogated the question of what that coalition might look like.

Chapter four, “Building Progressive Coalitions around Experience-Based Politics,” recommended the use of dialectics, a discussion of opinions, as a method of inquiry to highlight how social groups can interrogate the apolitical assumptions and political demands that underlie their own experiential claims, and arrive eventually at a more nuanced grasp of the social world. The narrative in this chapter is based on a conversation that occurred at a roundtable of four panelists and a moderator, entitled “African American Male Immersion Schools: Segregation? Separation? Or Innovation?” (AMIS) that occurred in 1992. Its co-sponsors included the National Urban League and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This event was held just one year after the first ABMS opened in Detroit, Michigan. The relevance of AMIS is that it was one of the few public venues in which Black male supporters and feminist critics met to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such schools.

The fourth chapter began by situating a normative-critical theory of power within its origins in the Frankfurt School of social theory and critical philosophy. Although critical theory has many definitions, it focuses on critiquing society as a whole in order to change it. As the roundtable participants discussed the political assumptions and political demands associated with their own and with their feminist challengers’ claims, the ABMS supporters and feminist critics make experiential claims regarding ABMS that advance as well as hinder a politics of resistance. In order to maximize the liberatory potential of their own appeals to experience, these advocates, according to Lindsay, have to recognize that improving Black boys’ educational outcomes involves doing the same for Black girls.

In the conclusion, “A New Politics of Experience,” Lindsay reiterates that Black male support appeals to political liberals, conservatives, and others who are often political adversaries because it fits into the current public support for vouchers, charter schools, single-gender schools, and other “choice-based” interventions. Also, ABMS supporters employ a fluid intersectional framework that does not privilege one sphere—race or gender—over another and appears to be liberatory in its intention. It has also a certain appeal by reinforcing that Black boys, rather than Black girls, are victims of racist, overtly feminized classrooms. Lindsay claimed once again that it is necessary to go to community-based supporters of Black achievement to form a coalition that thoughtfully assesses the claims of both ABMS supporters and feminists. Ultimately, a new democratic polity can be formed as a result of such dialectical discourse.

This is a well-researched, thoughtful book that should find a wide readership among educators, political scientists, and gender studies scholars. Lindsay provided us with big questions and suggested that there may be hope for an answer to Black achievement. Her encouragement of drawing on non-formal sources of wisdom (found at barbershops, community centers, etc.) is a welcome addition to the debate on ABMS. I would hope that we might hear more about that from the author in the future. She provided valuable historical context in order to explain current dilemmas as well as to point to ways forward.

At the fringes of Lindsay's argument is that schools are not only Eurocentric and feminized but also heteronormative. Although this becomes part of her intertextuality discussion and deserves to be, it does not take center stage. Perhaps that sphere is harder to explain than looking at the suspension rates, drop-out statistics, and disciplinary practices against boys and Black boys and girls. Nevertheless, one wonders what gay oppression looks in White feminized classrooms. I kept thinking about the author's own academic intertextuality as I read the book. Her expertise covers political science, gender studies, race, and possibly, sexual orientation. This breadth would seem to be a strength of the narrative but it also confirms that intertextuality is fluid and it is difficult not to privilege one—or two—spheres over others.

Lindsay's rigorous use of citations is helpful to the reader but can at times read like a dissertation literature review. This problem is more pronounced in chapters one and two. Her inclusion of quotes from the AMIS roundtable is interesting and revealing. One wonders if other conferences have been convened recently to discuss the issue. In chapter four, the author used the terms "reflexive" and "reflective" interchangeably. For example, "Self-reflectivity, another dimension of a normative-critical understanding of power" (p. 109), and "Green notes, moreover, that such reflexivity is ultimately the motive force of critical thought" (p. 109). I am unsure as to whether there is a purpose to this style or whether the terms are actually interchangeable, but it made me consider the meanings of both terms.

Finally, kudos goes to the editorial team. I found exactly one typo (Stolkey instead of Stokley) on page 132. In sum, this is a valuable book that should find wide appeal.

References

- Farrell, W., & Gray, J. (2018). *The boy crisis: Why our boys are struggling and what we can do about it*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.
- Lindsay, K. (2018). *In a classroom of their own: The intersection of race and feminist politics in all-Black male schools*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

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