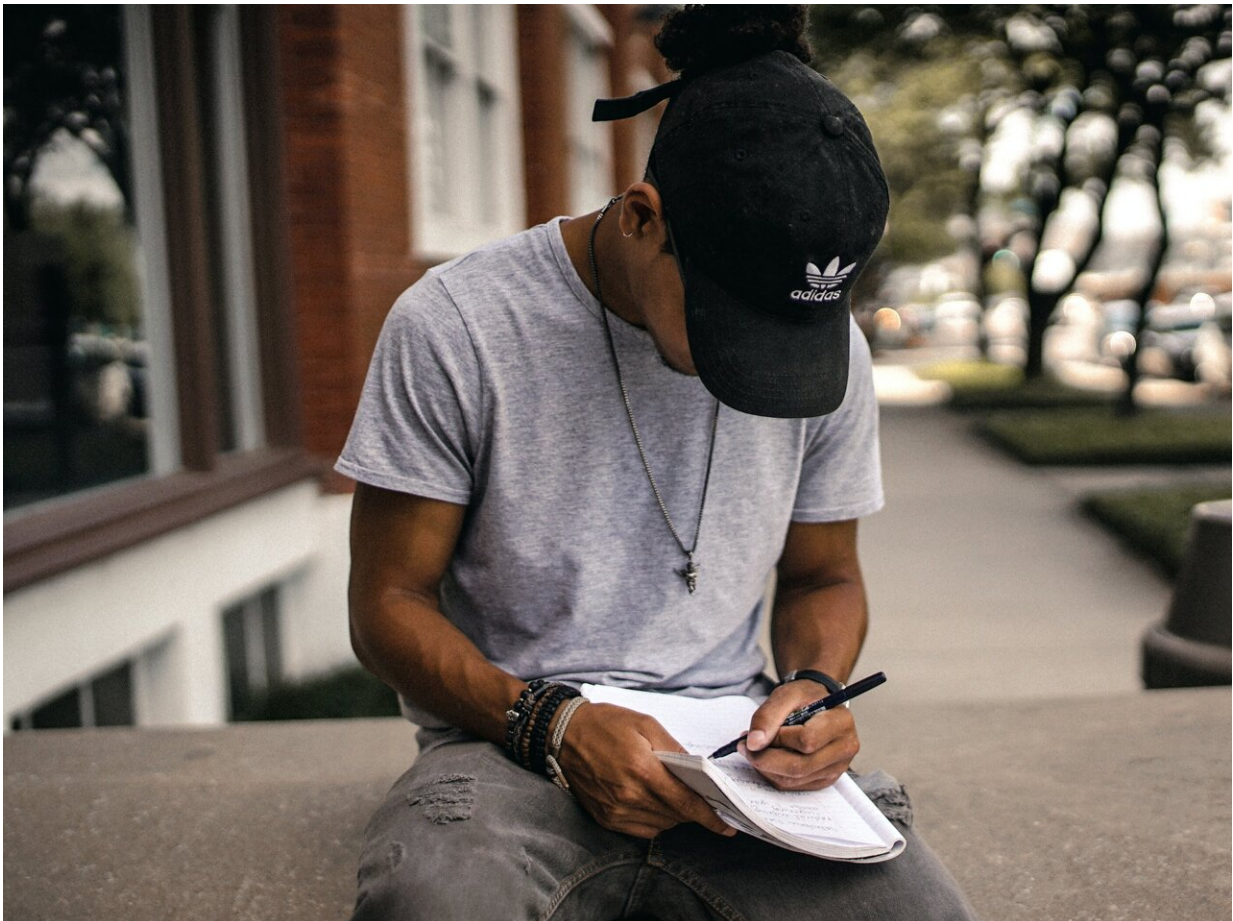


Researcher links Black students' lived experiences with feelings of belonging

May 17 2023, by Stephanie Koons



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While previous research has focused primarily on anti-Black racism in

predominantly white spaces, a study led by DeMarcus Jenkins, assistant professor of education (educational leadership) in the Penn State College of Education, examined the educational experiences of Black students in a predominantly Latino high school. The students' sense of unbelonging and feeling that their experiences are unimaginable to non-Black people may help to inform ways to address racism in schools, according to Jenkins.

Jenkins' research, published in *Equity and Excellence in Education*, revealed two major themes: (1) Black students felt a sense of unbelonging, and (2) they perceived their Blackness as unimaginable to non-Black people. "There's been scholarship that has looked at social/racial relations between Black and brown (Latino) communities," added Jenkins. "I wanted to draw from that body of scholarship to think about how Black students are experiencing their learning environments."

In his paper, Jenkins cited [prior research](#) on race and education that, he wrote, demonstrates that Black bodies are seen as "undesirable and require exclusion or neglect." He also drew on scholarship that shows that educators disproportionately discipline Black students via school suspensions or disciplinary referrals.

Jenkins began his study by conducting interviews and focus groups with Black students at a predominantly Latino high school in Arizona. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Arizona is only 5.4% Black or African American while the Hispanic or Latino category comprises 32.3% of the 7.276 million state population. As the Latino population continues to rise in Arizona and across the country, Jenkins said, an increasing number of Black students will be attending predominantly Latino schools. The focus of his research, he said, is "how Black students embody anti-Blackness, how does it manifest toward them, and how does that shape how they navigate school?"

To conduct his research, Jenkins observed several English classes and conducted focus groups in which he interviewed students about their experiences. The students' perception of [space](#), he said, was interconnected with feelings of discomfort and unbelonging.

More than half of the participants described their feelings in high school as being "unimaginable." During the interviews, students also expressed feelings of anger, anxiety or embarrassment rendered by adults who held authority over particular spaces such as the library and nurse's office. Several students articulated that they often felt like they did not have a place at the school outside of athletic clubs and extracurricular activities.

Jenkins' program of research considers the intersections of race, space and policy. In his current study, he pays particular attention to the body as a spatial landscape via visceral geography. Visceral geographies "regard the body as a useful geographical site of inquiry, interrogating how bodies feel internally—moods, sensations, emotions, physical states of being—in relation to the surrounding material and discursive environment."

"As an emerging field of study, Black geographies consider how Blackness is experienced not only socially, politically, and economically but also spatially," Jenkins wrote in his paper. "I explore how Black students experienced anti-Black racism and how they embodied these racial moments."

To understand how the students embodied racial moments at school, Jenkins used "Black Critical Theory"—an educational research approach to understanding the detailed and specific ways Black people live in and experience anti-Black spaces and anti-Black racism in schools.

"Anti-Blackness constructs Black people as inherently problematic and whose existence remains outside of humanity," explained Jenkins.

As a practical intervention, Jenkins wrote in the paper, educators could consider the [school](#)'s physical spaces and how they impact Black students' feelings of belonging. When educators can evaluate and mediate the forces that trigger negative visceral responses, said Jenkins, "then the ability of researchers to examine the conditions necessary to promote more positive schooling experiences for Black youth increases."

"Educators can open spaces for students to articulate their feelings and make intentional efforts to transform their classrooms so that all students feel a sense of belongingness," he said.

More information: DeMarcus A. Jenkins, *Feeling Black: Black Urban High School Youth and Visceral Geographies of Anti-Black Racism, Equity & Excellence in Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/10665684.2022.2131196](#)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Researcher links Black students' lived experiences with feelings of belonging (2023, May 17) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-links-black-students.html>

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