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The Criminalization of Black Girls in K-12 U.S Schools: A Public Health Issue

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the criminalization of Black girls in K-12 schools in the United States and presents possible solutions to the issue. A series of interviews conducted with Black girls and women who attended elementary, middle, and high school throughout the United States were used to develop the following research. The interviews were semi-structured with a set of questions surrounding the interviewees' relationships with school professionals, their experience with in-school discipline, and their sense of belonging within the school setting. Interviewees often expanded on the set questions with in-depth anecdotes of their personal experiences and what they witnessed in school. The interview responses were used to understand what experiences Black girls are having in school in relation to discipline; in addition, Black Critical Theory was used to further analyze and explain the recurring anti-Black treatment targeted towards Black girls. Interviews repeatedly revealed that Black girls are having ongoing encounters with violence, intolerance, lack of support within school, and exclusionary discipline. Additionally, this research found that Black girls are experiencing adultification as early as kindergarten and have developed personal and

shared trauma as a result of their school experiences. Furthermore, this study unveiled a strong need for school professionals and involved organizations to acknowledge the unique experiences of differing cultural and identity groups while constructing classroom environments and discipline policies.

Keywords: Latinx, parental involvement, first-generation

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A fundamental truth about the human experience is that we survive and thrive through learning. In this regard, what happens when a person's opportunity to learn is jeopardized or extinguished altogether? The result is the livelihood of that individual, too, is jeopardized or extinguished. Across the United States, the criminalization¹ that Black girls are experiencing directly threatens their learning and livelihood. Within the occurrence of criminalization school professionals approach and respond to Black girls as though they are older than what they are, Black girls have

¹ Criminalization is the act of turning an activity into a criminal offence by making it illegal. Black girls are often criminalized according to stereotypes such as being "loud", "aggressive" or "promiscuous".

developed excessive trauma, and Black girls are in need of cultural understanding and relatability from school professionals.

School Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools

The perception of Black girls and women as “combative” and “angry” has been widely adopted by society (Morris, 2016). This perspective ignites the school pushout² that Black girls and girls of color are experiencing within schools in the United States. School pushout, mainly enacted via school discipline policies, is the manifestation of a dominant racist mentality responsible for how society responds to and (mis)understands girls of color (Morris, 2018). Stereotypes of being “loud” and “angry” have become normalized descriptors of Black girls, and the slightest preview of a non-dominant expression of femininity often times causes school professionals to respond in a harmful way, whether through embarrassment, over-discipline, or physical violence (Onyeka-Crawford, et al., 2017).

Black girls are ten times more likely to experience discipline in comparison to their white girl counterparts (Crenshaw, et. al, 2015). Moreover, Black girls are eleven times more likely to be suspended than their white girl counterparts in New York and Boston school districts (Crenshaw, et. al, 2015). Additionally, Black girls across the United States are six times more likely to be suspended than their white girl counterparts (Onyeka-Crawford, et al., 2017). The increase in discipline that Black girls encounter makes it more likely for them to be pushed out of school, drop out of school, experience the criminal justice system, work low-wage jobs, or encounter unemployment (Crenshaw, et al., 2015). The Center for

American Progress revealed that the leading causes of suspension of Black girls are teacher bias and insufficient mental health support (Chakara, 2017). The anti-Black and racist ideologies that drive school professionals to treat Black girls ill with neglect and violence heavily contributes to the emotional and physical trauma that Black girls develop within school environments. It is important to acknowledge that Black individuals experience unique forms of oppression and violence that differ from what non-Black marginalized individuals encounter because of the centrality of anti-blackness in every dimension of society including school (Dumas, et al., 2016). Significantly, Dumas and Ross state, “antiblackness refers to a broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and (the possibility of) humanity”. The battle of society and in this case school professionals to acknowledge the humanity of Black girls and treat them with respect is made clear through how school professionals respond to Black girls in comparison to their counterparts. Repeatedly, the stories, actions, and language of Black girls are misunderstood by school professionals and in many cases, erased.

Childhood Erasure

“The social category of ‘children’ defines a group of individuals who are perceived to be distinct, with essential characteristics including innocence and the need for protection...” (Goff, 2014). As early as five years old, Black girls are often seen and treated as if they are older than what they are – a phenomena known as adultification. Further, adults including school professionals, expect Black girls to be more independent and familiar with adult-like topics. In fact, adults surveyed in the U.S in 2017 believe that Black girls are in need of less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort. Additionally, Black girls are seen as being more familiar with conversations and displays of sexual activity (Epstein, et al., 2017). Adultification may mark the beginning of childhood erasure for Black

² School pushout refers to exclusionary discipline policies that result in students being removed from learning spaces.

girls because of the likelihood that the perception of Black girls as less innocent is related to school professionals' disproportionate acts of discipline towards Black girls (Epstein, et al., 2017). As Black individuals, Black girls are already assumed to be disruptive or angry; additionally, as girls, Black girls are expected to know "right" from "wrong". In the eyes of society, especially school professionals, Black girls are held to a higher standard of behavior which may contribute to the high frequency at which Black girls are disciplined as well as the reasons for which they are disciplined. For example: often times Black girls experience discipline for being "loud" or "sexually promiscuous" and dressing inappropriately (Epstein, et al., 2017).

Morris (2019) established through a series of interviews with Black girls ages 15 to 23 that educators demonstrate less patience and care towards Black girls when they do not meet the expectations of educators. Moreover, the ongoing hyper-sexualization³ of Black girls by school professionals makes Black girls more likely to be dress-coded or experience discipline because of their attire. It is worth mentioning, however, that the perception of Black girls as hyper-sexual individuals is a burden of the perceivers rather than Black girls themselves. Further, if a Black girl wears shorts that end above the top of her knee, it cannot be assumed that her intention is to be sexual in any way; however, if a school professional views that Black girl as being promiscuous that is because the school professional observes her that way, not because she is. In any situation the sexualization of school age children is perverse. The belief that Black girls are engaged in sexual activity at a young age is a key element in how school professionals interpret the sexuality of Black girls (Morris, 2019). Moreover, it is important to

acknowledge that how Black girls are viewed by school professionals and community members determines how they are treated and how they respond to and view themselves.

The adultification of Black girls means that school professionals and other members of society begin to treat Black girls like adults at a young age, not allowing them to make child-like mistakes with grace; instead, they are emotionally and physically harmed and mistreated because of society's own tainted perception of how they should exist.

Unseen Trauma

Black girls are more likely to have encounters with violence or sexual abuse both inside and outside of the classroom. The experiences of Black girls with violence and sexual abuse inform how they respond to certain actions or behave within the classroom setting (Morris 2019). Without a clear understanding of the traumas that a community of people encounter behavior and language can easily be misread and blame can be placed on the child in the situation.

Additionally, the traumatic encounters Black girls have within schools because of language or actions used towards them also inform how they interact with school professionals. Often times school professionals respond to Black girls in language that is cold and does not allow room for meaningful conversation, just punitive reactions (Crenshaw, et al., 2015). Morris (2016) highlights some of her interviews with Black girls in which they shared that educators have referred to them as "annoying" or "disruptive" when they asked questions in class. One interviewee of Morris', Mecca, described an instance where her teacher yelled at her to stop talking when she finished her coursework early. Mecca stated, "And now you're [the teacher] focused on discipline. Then I'm sent out of class. They need to focus on teaching the kids" (Morris, 2016). Recurring responses and actions of intolerance can cause one to feel unwelcome and misplaced in such an

³Hypersexualization is the depiction of someone or a group of people as sexual objects. Black girls are often seen as objectified as overly sexual and disciplined as a result.

environment and when one must return to the same unwelcoming place it can be mentally and emotionally disturbing.

METHOD

The detrimental effects of criminalization on the health of Black girls establishes the criminalization of Black girls as a public health issue - an issue in which the safety and health of a community is at risk and can be addressed through education, policy making and research for disease and injury prevention. In regard to discovering solutions to end the criminalization of Black girls and school pushout, an immense value rests in the voices of Black girls and women themselves. This research is founded on narrative and community-based methodology used to conduct interviews with eighteen Black girls and women from various backgrounds who attended school in the United States. The interviews explored the experiences Black girls have with school professionals and in-school discipline. Two interviewees were enrolled in high school at the time the interview was conducted, eleven of the interviewees graduated high school within the last four years, and a total of sixteen interviewees (including those who recently graduated high school and not as recently) were not enrolled in a K-12 institution. All interviewees attended K-12 schools in the following areas of the United States - North Carolina, New York City, and various cities within California. Further, the mean age of interviewees is 21 years old. There is no focus on a particular location within the U.S for this development; instead, this research focuses on gaging the breadth of how this phenomenon functions in the lives of Black girls and women who attended school throughout the U.S. Additionally, including the narratives of individuals who are affected by a phenomenon ensures the preservation of cultural values held by members of the community. The preservation of cultural

understanding and values is necessary to develop the most effective solution for the affected community.

RESULTS

The interviews repeatedly uncovered that Black girls have endured both personal and shared trauma in response to harsh discipline in educational spaces and have been subjected to adultification and childhood erasure. Significantly, the majority of participants exposed a lack of support and cultural understanding from school professionals.

Personal and Shared Trauma

The interviews convey that 72% or 13/18 participants experienced exclusionary discipline directly. Nine out of thirteen individuals that experienced exclusionary discipline were disciplined by white school professionals, mainly white women. Three of the remaining four individuals voiced that they received punishment from a Black school professional while the other participant shared that her disciplinarian was an Asian woman teacher. Five participants or 28% experienced suspension or expulsion. Further, three of the five participants expressed they were disciplined by a white school professional and the remaining two were disciplined by a Black school professional. Eleven out of eighteen or 61% of interviewees self-policed themselves and experienced personal trauma as a result of their encounters with discipline in K-12. Moreover, 72% or 13/18 participants developed hyper-awareness resulting from witnessing other Black girls experience exclusionary discipline. Individual trauma results from events experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being ("Trauma", n.d.). Additionally,

according to Degloma (2009), groups who have been affected by trauma explain that there are psychological consequences of trauma that can be spread among members of the same community or social group. In this research, self-policing is mainly categorized as an element of individual trauma because the participants experiences with discipline affected their own mental, social, and emotional well-being. Furthermore, in this context hyper-awareness is categorized as an element of shared trauma because participants who did not have direct encounters with exclusionary discipline were still affected by what they witnessed due to their shared racial and gender identities.

Adultification of Black Girls

Twelve out of eighteen or 67% participants encountered intolerance or lack of support from at least one teacher in their K-12

schooling. Additionally, 67% or 12/18 participants shared that during K-12 they witnessed that Black girls were dress-coded more frequently than their non-Black counterparts.

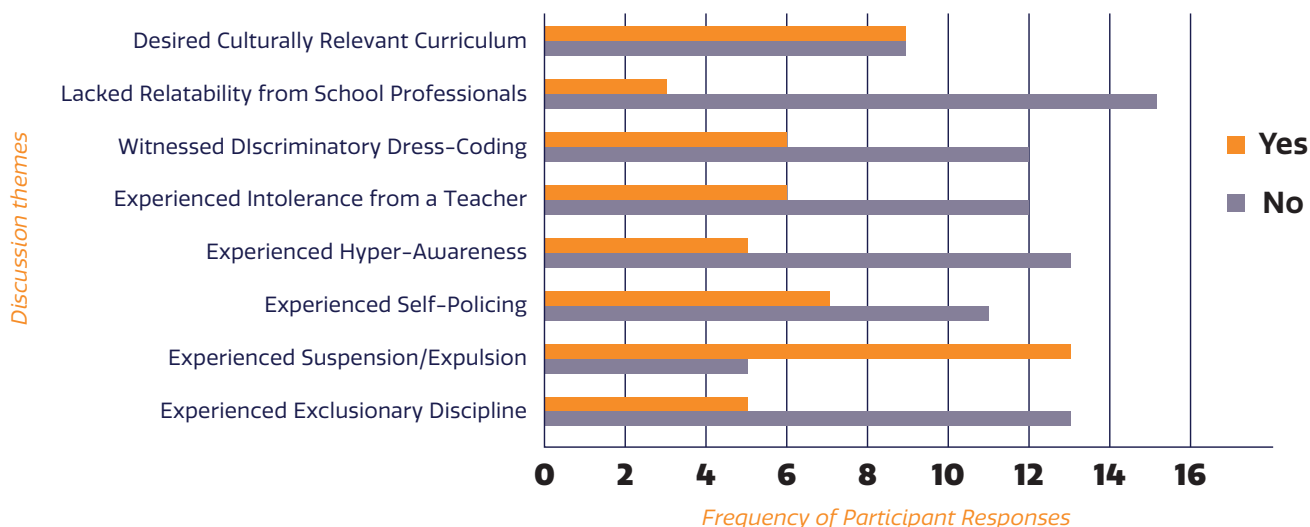
Common Needs Expressed

The interviews showed that 83% or 15/18 of interviewees lack attention, cultural understanding, and relatability from school professionals. Additionally, 50% or 9/18 interviewees expressed a desire for culturally relevant curriculum in response to being asked what they felt they were missing from school. Three of the remaining nine individuals experienced a form of culturally inclusive curriculum that they found beneficial to their learning. Further, six of the remaining nine individuals did not mention or acknowledge a personal need for culturally relevant curriculum in K-12.

Visual Representation

The figure below visually depicts the aforementioned results. On this graph, blue represents the amount of participants who answered “yes” to the statements listed on the y-axis. On the other hand, orange represents the number of participants who answered “no” to the statements listed on the y-axis.

FIGURE 1: Criminalization of Black Girls in K-12 Schools in the US



DISCUSSION

Personal and Shared Trauma: “Not Me, But I Still Feel...”

The interviews reveal that the personal and shared trauma that Black girls developed was in response to personal encounters with discipline policies as well as witnessing other Black girls experience exclusionary discipline. By definition exclusionary discipline encompasses punitive behavior that removes a student from their educational environment. In the context of this research, exclusionary discipline can include strong dress coding, shaming, being sent out of the learning space, suspension (both in-school and out-of-school), or expulsion among other exclusionary acts.

All of the five participants who experienced suspension or expulsion described the severity of their punishment as being unjust due to a lack of understanding, compassion, or belief in their perspective from school professionals. School professionals are often quick to push Black girls out of the classroom for the slightest “disruption”. One participant stated, “I had one teacher that tried to suspend me for drinking water in her class”. Another participant shared, “I was kicked out of class for not taking my hoodie off... I had a lot going on at home”. These instances reflect the dominant thought processes of school professionals discussed in the literature review and expose the anti-blackness that supports oppressive institutional practices (Dumas, et al., 2016).

Society depicts Black girls and women as being disruptive and lacking a willingness to learn; thus, when a Black girl does something that is the slightest bit off task or not to the teachers liking she is quickly punished as a

result of implicit bias⁴. Additionally, the extremity of the disciplinary action can cause the individual who was disciplined and individuals who have shared identities with the disciplined individual to move with extreme caution within learning spaces. The over-disciplining of Black girls produces trauma within the individual as well as the community through physical, mental and emotional disturbances.

Adultification of Black Girls: “She Treated Us Like Adults...”

The adultification of Black girls encompasses both the hyper-sexualization of Black girls as well as society’s assumption that Black girls do not need support from teachers and school professionals. Both the literature review and the narratives from the interviews conducted reveal that Black girls are being punished more frequently and harshly when they are not in compliance with school regulations than their non-Black counterparts. One participant stated, “I was missing a level of belief in my aspirations that my peers received that I didn’t”. Comparatively, Black girls are not receiving as much attention and support as their non-Black peers because many of their school professionals believe that Black girls don’t need as much support or nurturing.

The difference in frequency at which Black girls were dress-coded exposed in the results was not simply because Black girls were not following the dress-code as much, rather, Black girls were targeted more by school professionals for being “overly sexual” or a “distraction”. One participant shared, “I remember once getting forced to change because I wore a short dress... I felt like other

⁴Implicit bias is any set of unconsciously-held set of associations about a group of people.

people around could get away with wearing whatever they wanted". The unjust targeting and hyper-sexualization of Black girls contributes to the criminalization they are suffering within educational spaces. The preconception that Black girls are more familiar with adult topics such as sex taints school professionals' interpretations of how Black girls present themselves. Again, it is important to recognize that the hyper-sexualization of Black girls is not about what they are wearing, rather, it is about school professionals viewing them in a sexual manner.

Further, the hyper-sexualization that Black girls are subjected to accompanied with the lack of support and attention from teachers and school professionals can lead to questions of personal value and belonging. In fact, multiple participants shared that the environment and attitudes of teachers made them feel as though their authentic self wasn't good enough. One interviewee stated, "It's painful because I feel like in many spaces I have to present a sanitized version of myself to be respected" and another frustratedly shared, "How do I appeal to them... by not bringing my whole self into the room".

Common Needs Expressed

The majority of interviewees believed that if school professionals had a deeper understanding of the cultural background and customs of the students they were working with there would have been fewer misunderstandings, more compassion, and more communication between the teachers and the students. One participant stated, "I feel like I was learning about everyone else, but no one was learning about me". When looking at which cultural customs, beliefs, or experiences are represented within schools often times the customs that Black girls as well as students from other marginalized

communities relate to are not present. Another student shared, "My peers also needed to learn about the Black experience and what's going on in the Black community". The presence of culturally relevant curriculum allows both teachers and students to learn about marginalized communities and narratives that are not historically acknowledged or discussed in school settings. School professionals' lack of awareness about the cultural experiences of their students contributes to a lack of understanding, sensitivity and connectivity among teachers and students. The narratives of Black girls and the literature surrounding the exclusionary treatment of Black girls expose that lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity allows school professionals to perform microaggressions and criminalize Black girls.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research suggest that Black girls have been and currently are experiencing trauma as a result of their own discipline experiences and the discipline experiences of other Black girls. There is evidence of shared trauma among Black girls which has led to excessive self-policing, restriction of self-expression, and hyper-cautionary interactions with school professionals and other figures of authority. Black girls have been continuously subjected to adultification by school professionals which simultaneously places them in the center of shame for being a "distraction" and the margins through lack of support and positive attention in the classroom. Recognizing the presence of anti-blackness within school discipline policies, and teaching practices is an important step towards creating safer learning spaces for Black girls and pulling them in from the margins. As Morris writes, "When we push black girls away from school, we increase the likelihood that they will experience harm"

which consequently affects their trajectory in life.

It is important to note that this research is limited in part by the small sample size, access to possible interviewees, and a lack of in-depth comparison to non-Black experiences within the same educational context. Access to individuals for the interviews within the set time frame was limited for the following reasons: scheduling with individuals who were currently enrolled in K-12 posed a difficulty, and some individuals were not willing to relive the unpleasant memories of their schooling experiences. As a result of the above-mentioned difficulty with access and time constraints the sample size is relatively small. The difficulty in overcoming both of these limitations was mainly the time constraints being that this project was conducted within an academic program and not solely on an independent schedule. The limited access, and small sample size does affect the depth of this particular study; however, points made in other literature does support the significant findings in this research. Additionally, another limitation of this research is that the study did not allow for the comparison of the experiences of Black girls with the experiences of non-Black groups in similar educational settings. Moving forward, continuing this research with more resources and time would allow for improvement in both access and sample size. It is evident that this topic requires more attention and exploration; thus, using a large sample population will add depth and more insight into the findings mentioned in this research.

Black girls and women have been and still are in the margins of the education system in the United States, fighting for their livelihood in a country that refuses to acknowledge their humanity and right to learn. Black girls are

being pushed out of schools by discipline policies and teaching practices that unjustly criminalize their behavior.

It is recommended that professionals undergo training that will allow them to acknowledge and identify the impact of trauma (both inside and outside of school) on the behavior of students. Additionally, schools are advised to collaborate with organizations that are informed of and dedicated to serving the needs of Black girls and creating spaces for Black girls to speak about their experiences. Developing a space for Black girls to discuss and process their experiences could be a form of healing and therapy as well as a way to involve Black girls in the policy and alternative discipline development process. Lastly, it is the responsibility of school professionals and educators to ask questions about how their policies can affect Black girls or students from other marginalized communities. The significance of these recommendations is that they highlight the necessity of school professionals and involved organizations to acknowledge that individuals from different marginalized communities have different needs and experiences. This paper is a call to end school pushout in the United States, to give Black girls their childhood, and to give Black girls their lives.

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McNair Cohort: 2018–2019



Biography:

I am currently a 4th year student in Marshall college studying Political Science and African American Studies. I have been involved with the Black Student Union, OASIS, Marshall College, the Black Resource Center, and AEP. After I graduate Spring of 2020, I plan to enter a PhD program in Education with an emphasis on Critical Race Theory and work in the field of school and curriculum development.

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