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# When Black Children Are Targeted for Punishment

By DERRICK DARBY and JOHN L. RURY SEPT. 25, 2017

Sixty years ago today, Minnijean Brown and eight other black students walked into all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., as angry white protesters shouted obscenities, spat on them and threatened violence in full view of television cameras.

The Little Rock Nine were escorted by soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division at the order of President Eisenhower, a moment that is rightly celebrated as a triumph in civil rights history.

But a few months after taking her historic steps, Minnijean was suspended for dropping a cafeteria tray after white students obstructed her path. She was later expelled for calling other tormentors “white trash,” after they threw a purse full of combination locks at her. Although these were not major transgressions, and she was not the instigator, Minnijean was the one harshly disciplined, not the white students.

Back then, inequitably harsh discipline was a tool used by resistant white schools to make sure that racial integration would not mean equal education for black students. The racial discipline gap is now a firmly established reality in Arkansas and around the country.

Today, racial disparities in school discipline send the message that blacks are still unequal and unwanted in Arkansas schools. The state ranks 13th in the out-of-school suspension gap between black and white students, according to a recent report. During the 2012 school year, black students were suspended five times as often as whites were, and little has changed since then.

The racial discipline gap is not restricted to Arkansas, or to the South. The same report finds that several Northern states, including Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin, rank above Arkansas in the black-white suspension gap. And a recent study on California schools from the Brookings Institution finds evidence of this gap despite a statewide initiative to reduce suspensions.

According to a Department of Education report, black students nationally were three times more likely to be suspended than whites in 2012. Suspensions occur most commonly in secondary schools, but black children were more than twice as likely to be suspended from preschool as well. Harsher discipline for black students is not just a Southern or state-level problem. It is a national crisis.

Other evidence indicates that black students are punitively disciplined for relatively minor infractions, such as showing disrespect to teachers, willful disobedience or talking too loudly, while white students who commit more serious infractions are punished less severely.

White middle-class parents, exercising white privilege, often intervene on behalf of their children, making school authorities reluctant to discipline them harshly. These students are usually viewed by staff as “good kids,” while black kids are typically labeled troublemakers.

Unfortunately, these perceptions of racial differences in conduct and character have long histories in America. In 1891, the Southern educational leader J. L. M. Curry proclaimed that blacks displayed “lack of self restraint” and didn’t obey “moral law.” Today many educators appear to harbor such views, causing black students to view school as a hostile environment, leading to higher dropout rates, lower levels of achievement and disengagement from school activities.

Some educators and other observers blame black kids for the racial discipline gap, suggesting that they misbehave more often. But this may be more myth than fact, as some studies suggest that race is a more powerful predictor of discipline than differential behavior, especially when considering the unequal penalties assessed to black and white kids for comparable infractions.

In 1957, racial inequality and the racial achievement gap were forcefully maintained by white politicians, parents and police officers determined to keep the Little Rock Nine and other blacks from attending white schools. School integration broke racial barriers at the schoolhouse doors, and the racial achievement gap closed considerably in the 1970s and '80s. Today about a third of black students attend majority white secondary schools, yet the color line endures within these schools because of unfair suspension and expulsion practices.

School districts around the country are experimenting with ways of mitigating these punitive discipline practices that land more harshly on black students, assaulting their dignity, depressing their achievement and pushing some out of school and on to a pipeline to prison. The shift to restorative justice approaches is a promising step. This method brings together the victim and the offender, as well as teachers and parents, to address what happened and come up with solutions. But what about schools slow to follow this example?

We need to get more hard data on the racial discipline gap from resistant school districts. We need more anti-racist training for administrators and teachers. We need a standardized accountability index to monitor school disciplinary practices to ensure that black students are no more likely than other students to be subjected to suspension. And we need to tie school performance evaluations to making measurable progress in achieving these goals.

Minnijean's experience, and the experiences of countless black students who bear the brunt of punitive discipline in K-12 schools today, demonstrates that we still have work to do to address this injustice.

Derrick Darby, a professor in the philosophy department at the University of Michigan, and John L. Rury, a professor in the school of education at the University of Kansas, are

co-authors of “The Color of Mind: Why the Origins of the Achievement Gap Matter for Justice.”

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