

Black and Targeted?: An Analysis of Black Female Students and Disproportionate Discipline in

North Carolina Public Schools

Yvonna Hines-McCoy

Doctoral Student

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

yhines@uncc.edu

### **Abstract**

Black male students have been the primary subject of school discipline research for the past four decades. Black girls and their discipline experiences are often overlooked and ignored. As a result, the purpose of this study is to examine the discipline experiences of Black girls in North Carolina public schools and to explore whether Black female students are overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. In order to explore the preceding, disproportionality was calculated for Black girls in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions during the 2011-2012 school year. Results suggest that they are disproportionately overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions, but not expulsions. Given the findings of this study, recommendations are included to guide the directions of urban educational stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Black female students, school discipline, disproportionality

Black and Targeted?: An Analysis of Black Female Students and Disproportionate Discipline in  
North Carolina Public Schools

**Introduction**

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014), Black students, beginning in preschool, are subject to inordinate rates of school disciplinary sanctions. As a result, a *discipline gap*, characterized by disproportionate rates of suspension and expulsion, exists between Black students and their White counterparts. Despite similar rates of misbehavior, Black students, on average, are suspended at three times the rate of White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This disturbing yet nationwide phenomenon has been the subject of extensive scholarly investigations since it was first revealed to the American public over forty years ago (Children's Defense Fund, 1975).

Unfortunately, however, the majority of the literature ignores the unique discipline experiences of Black girls and focuses predominantly on the plight of Black boys. Although warranted, school discipline research should extend beyond Black boys. Black girls and their discipline-related experiences are of equal importance and deserve to be explored.

The purpose of this study is to examine the discipline experiences of Black girls in North Carolina public schools and to explore whether Black female students are overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. In order to explore the preceding, disproportionality was calculated for Black girls in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions during the 2011-2012 school year.

### **Literature Review**

Black girls in schools throughout the country are suspended and expelled at rates that far exceed that of girls of any other racial or ethnic group (U.S Department of Education, 2014). In comparison to White girls, Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended for violating rules of conduct; however, in states such as Wisconsin, Black girls are suspended at a rate that is more than ten times greater than White girls (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, Bettina Love noted the following:

In 2012, in New York City, fifty-three Black girls were expelled compared with zero White girls. In every state in America, Black girls are more than twice as likely to be suspended from school as White girls. And darker-skinned Black girls are suspended at a rate that is three times greater than those with lighter skin. (p. 5)

Black girls are also suspended at rates that are higher than most boys. During the 2011-2012 school year, 12% of Black female students received an out-of-school suspension compared to 9% of Hispanic/Latino males and 6% of White males (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

### **Explanations for Disproportionate Discipline**

Research suggests that Black female students receive more discipline sanctions because of implicit racial bias held by adults with the power to make discipline-related decisions in schools (Paul & Araneo, 2018). As a result, teachers may subconsciously rely on stereotypical images of Black girls (e.g., loud, volatile, promiscuous, and confrontational) to interpret and address their behaviors (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensburg, 2010). Although there are other plausible explanations for the disproportionate discipline of Black girls, such as teacher inexperience and cultural discontinuity, “racial bias has gained the most consideration in the

literature, perhaps due to the educational discrimination that Blacks have historically experienced in the United States” (Blake et al., 2010, p. 93).

Scholars have noted that in addition to being the most disciplined group of female students, Black girls, when disciplined, are more likely to be disciplined for offenses that are more open to interpretation, such as defiance, improper dress, disruptive behavior, and aggression (Blake et al., 2010; Morris, 2007; & Morris & Perry, 2017). The literature claims this may be due to both implicit racial bias and the tendency of school practitioners to respond more harshly to Black girls who defy traditional standards of femininity as defined by White middle-class culture (Blake et al., 2010; Morris, 2007). Traditional standards of femininity expect girls and women to be docile, frail, quiet, and reserved. In his qualitative study on the educational perspectives and obstacles of Black girls, Morris (2007) found that teachers negatively perceived Black girls’ tendency to assert themselves in classrooms even though they benefited academically by doing so. Their behaviors and manners were often questioned and reprimanded by educators for being unladylike. Morris (2007) observed that the presumed unladylike behavior of Black girls was often met with punitive discipline practices, but mainly as an attempt to instill stereotypical qualities of ladylike behavior.

### **Effects of Disproportionate Discipline**

The use of exclusionary discipline practices as a method to improve student behavior is ineffective and detrimental. In fact, research shows that it is associated with negative school and life outcomes (Arcia, 2006), especially for females. According to Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010), suspension alters student perception of school and education and leads to less motivation to succeed academically. Considering that Black girls are disproportionately at risk of suspension and expulsion, they are also disproportionately at risk of decreased access to full participation in

school, and, consequently, academic failure, grade retention, teenage pregnancy, high school dropout, delinquency, unemployment, poverty, and incarceration (Arcia, 2006). This may explain, to some extent, why Black women are disproportionately employed in low-wage work, as well as disproportionately incarcerated.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

A secondary analysis of quantitative discipline data was conducted to answer the research questions for this study. This quantitative study utilized publicly available data from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR). The data utilized is from the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) database, or biennial survey of U.S. public schools. To ensure compliance with federal civil rights laws and identify access and barriers to educational opportunity, all public schools (early childhood through grade 12) that receive federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education are legally obligated to submit compliance data to OCR. The CRDC collects and disaggregates discipline data (to a certain extent) by race/ethnicity, gender, English language learner status, and disability status, but not by school level. For the purpose of this study, only data applicable to North Carolina was utilized.

### **Measuring Disproportionality**

Discipline disproportionality occurs when groups of students are present in discipline sanctions at higher or lower percentages/rates than their presence in student enrollment. Disproportionality is calculated by dividing the percentage of Group X with OSS/expulsions by the percentage of Group X in overall enrollment. A disproportionality index (DI) of 1 indicates no disproportionality whereas an index greater than 1 signifies overrepresentation in OSS/expulsions and an index less than 1 shows underrepresentation in OSS/expulsions.

## Results

### Findings

Black female students in North Carolina public schools are overrepresented in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. As a result, they are at greater risk than female students of any other racial or ethnic group of being suspended. During the 2011-2012 school year, Black girls accounted for roughly 12.9% of North Carolina public school students, yet accounted for approximately 17.2% of all one or more out-of-school suspensions ( $DI=1.3$ ), but only 7.1% of expulsions ( $DI=.55$ ). White girls, on the other hand, represented approximately 25% of the student population, but only 7.6% of all one or more out-of-school suspensions ( $DI=.30$ ) and 11% of expulsions ( $DI=.44$ ). Unlike their Black female counterparts, White girls were significantly underrepresented in both forms of exclusionary discipline.

### Limitations

Although findings of this study are consistent with the limited research that examines the discipline experiences of Black girls, it is important to note that there are limitations to this study that scholars and educational stakeholders should consider. First and foremost, because CRDC data is not disaggregated by infraction type, this study was unable to determine why Black female students received out-of-school suspensions or expulsions let alone provide explanations for disproportionality. Prior research has noted that Black students, in general, are more likely to be disciplined for offenses that are open to interpretation, such as defiance and disrespect as opposed to objectively defined behaviors like fighting (Triplett & Ford, 2019). Black girls, in particular, are most overrepresented for defiance (Blake et al., 2010). The literature claims that this may be due to cultural mismatch, unfamiliarity, and misunderstandings between the

teacher's culture and the culture of his or her students (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba, 2000; Townsend, 2000).

### **Implications**

Findings of this study suggest that Black girls in North Carolina public schools are susceptible to inequitable discipline sanctions and unjust school experiences. This most likely can be attributed to the implementation of biased discipline policies and the internalization of negative stereotypes that criminalize Black girls and their behaviors. In addition to the preceding, findings of this study suggest that school officials are misusing their discretion and overusing punitive discipline.

### **Recommendations**

#### **De-biased learning for School Officials**

In order to get a better handle on the school discipline gap, several recommendations have been developed in order to address this disturbing, yet pervasive phenomenon. First and foremost, because racial disparities in school discipline are largely attributed to implicit racial bias, teachers and administrators must endure ongoing experiences (preferably led by consultants and/or trainers on issues of racial and social justice) that unmask their implicit biases, specifically against Black students. By doing so, they will be in a position to participate in cross-racial skill building and assess how their implicit biases and ethnocentric tendencies can be combated specifically as a culturally responsive classroom manager and decision-maker.

#### **Culturally Responsive Classroom Management and Decision-Making for School Officials**

Culturally responsive classroom managers are aware of their implicit biases and ethnocentric tendencies, as well as knowledgeable about their students' cultural backgrounds and communities (Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004). They understand how school and

individual practice and policies interact to perpetuate inequities, such as racial disparities in school discipline. Culturally responsive classroom managers and decision-makers modify their behaviors to establish cultural synchronization in the classroom, which, research suggests, has the power to close the discipline gap (Monroe, 2006). Furthermore, they know how to effectively manage a classroom. Unfortunately, however, most new teachers lack this skill simply because few states require teacher education programs to integrate culturally responsive classroom management courses and/or professional development. This is unacceptable. Teachers should not be entering the profession unprepared. Given the racial and ethnic diversity of public school students and the homogeneity of its teaching force, teacher education programs and school districts alike should provide preservice and in-service teachers consistent training in culturally responsive classroom management practices. In regards to the *racial discipline gap*, “Teacher inexperience, lack of cultural synchrony between teachers and students, and inept classroom behavior management skills have all been offered as plausible explanations for teachers’ overreliance on office referrals and punitive discipline strategies to manage Black children’s behavior” (Blake et al, 2011, p. 93).

### **Co-Constructed Discipline Policies for Schools**

According to Morris (2015), discipline policies are rarely, if ever, constructed with Black students, let alone Black culture (e.g. communication styles, hairstyles, stereotypes, etc.) in mind. As a result, numerous school policies unfairly target Black culture, and thus, Black students. In an interview with *The Cut* (2016), Morris described how Black girls are uniquely targeted:

Girls come to school with Afros — that’s how their hair grows out. Girls come to school in braids and locs. These are styles that at least have origins in African traditions. Recently, there was a group of girls in North Carolina who were threatened with

suspension for wearing head wraps for Black History Month. Dress codes have to be reevaluated, and I think at a bare minimum it's appropriate to remove all language that unfairly targets and disproportionately impacts a particular group of students, especially when it's associated with expressions of cultural identity (para. 4).

Co-created discipline policies have the potential to eliminate Black students from being unjustly selected and unfairly punished.

### **Disciplinary Review Board for Schools**

A disciplinary review board should be established at each school site. If feasible, the DRB should be made up of a racially and ethnically diverse group of culturally responsive classroom managers and decision-makers. The DRB is primarily responsible for assessing subjective student infractions and referrals, as well as the level of threat imposed by the student's actions. Different levels of threat warrant different responses. As a group, the DRB determines the associated consequence(s), if any, for the student's behavior.

### **Conclusion**

The vast majority of school discipline research highlights the inequitable discipline experiences of Black boys while ignoring the unique experiences of their Black female counterparts. Although Black male students and Black female students have similar experiences in the school discipline system, it is imperative that future scholarly investigations continue to examine them collectively, but also independently. Although beyond the scope of this study, future research should explore reasons for the overrepresentation of Black girls in exclusionary discipline, specifically out-of-school suspensions.

## References

- Arcia, E. (2006). Achievement and enrollment status of suspended students: Outcomes in a large, multicultural school district. *Education and Urban Society, 38*, 359-369.
- Blake, J.J., Butler, B. R., Lewis, C. W., & Darensbourg, A. (2011). Unmasking the inequitable discipline experiences of urban black girls: Implications for urban educational stakeholders. *The Urban Review, 43*, 90-106.
- Children's Defense Fund. (1975). *School suspensions: Are they helping children?* Cambridge, MA: Washington Research Project.
- Gregory, A., Skiba, R.J., Lewis, C.W., & Darensbourg, A. (2011). Unmasking the inequitable discipline experiences of urban black girls: Implications for urban educational stakeholders. *The Urban Review, 43*, 90-106.
- Love, B.L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Morris, E. W. (2007). "Ladies" or "Loudies"? Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms. *Youth and Society, 38*, 490-515.
- Morris, E.W., & Perry, B.L. (2017). Girls behaving badly? Race, gender, and subjective evaluation in the discipline of African American girls. *Sociology of Education, 90*, 127-148.
- Morris, M. (2015). *Pushout: The criminalization of black girls in schools*. New Press.
- Paul, D.G., & Araneo, J. (2019). "Orange is the new black" comes to New Jersey's public schools: Black girls and disproportionate rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. *The Urban Review, 51(2)*, 326-343.
- Schwieggershausen, E. (2016, March 23). *School discipline gone wrong: How biased policies*

*push black bias out of school.* The Cut.

<https://www.thecut.com/2016/03/pushout-monique-morris-black-girls-school-discipline.html>

Skiba, R.J. (2000). *Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice.*

Bloomington: Indiana Educational Policy Center.

United States Department of Education: Office for Civil Rights (2014). *Civil rights data*

*collection data snapshot: School discipline.* Retrieved from

<https://ocrdata.ed.gov/downloads/crdc-school-discipline-snapshot.pdf>.

Weinstein, C. S., Tomlinson-Clarke, S. & Curran, M. (2004). Toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55, 24-38.