

Disproportionate Rates of Discipline and the African-Descended Girl

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A 16-year old African-American female student was dragged across the room while seated in her desk, had the desk flipped over, was placed in a chokehold, and was ultimately handcuffed and charged with a criminal offense (Jarvie, 2015). The teenager, identified only as Shakara became a household name in the fall of 2015 when video surfaced of her public mistreatment at the hands of Deputy Ben Fields who was employed by Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina. This is but one of many incidents where African-American females have run afoul of school and district expectations and found themselves at odds with teachers, school administrators and sometimes law enforcement. When disciplinary efforts are punitive rather than restorative, this conflict contributes to the separation of girls from school and to their disproportionate rates of involvement in the juvenile justice system (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Crenshaw, et. al go on to note that conflicts that might have been better solved through counseling or other conflict management efforts are instead being referred to the juvenile justice system which enhances the school-to-prison pipeline. This may also substantiate why African descended females are the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015).

This literature review will focus on the intersectionality of gender and race as it pertains to girls of African descent and their experiences with the disciplinary system in K-12 schools. With seemingly little room for error, Black girls find themselves with elevated referral rates for disciplinary infractions. They are being referred to school administrators and/or law enforcement for infractions ranging from the use of profanity, physical aggression and defiance. In the case of Black females, it is suspected that teachers subconsciously make discipline decisions based on previously held stereotypes that surround their own ideas about femininity rather than the girls potential

for violence (Blake, Butler, Lewis, Darensbourg, 2010).

The criminalization of America's Black youth has been trending upward in the last decade but has been increasing since the 1970's (Losen & Skiba, 2010). In McKinney, Texas Eric Casebolt was absolved of any wrongdoing after he pointed a gun at unarmed teens and illegally detained a female by kneeling on her at a pool party. Casebolt was not held criminally liable and was permitted to resign despite his behavior. Six-year old Salecia Johnson was detained and handcuffed in a police squad room after kicking over a shelf at school. Though it is not suggested that inappropriate behaviors be ignored, it has quietly and definitively become the norm to criminalize youth behaviors and thus fueling the school to prison pipeline (Annamma, Anyon, Joseph, Farrar, Greer, Downing, & Simmons, 2016).

In 2015, persons of African descent comprised a mere 13% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), however, African-American females are six times more likely to face school suspension than their Caucasian counterparts (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). The belief that Black girls are misbehaving at a staggeringly higher rate than their counterparts and thus are suffering the consequences of such may factor largely in the ways in which school officials respond to these reported infractions. The increase in zero-tolerance school policies has forced educators into a hardened stance on behaviors that were previously viewed as irritating or minimally offensive (Perry & Morris, 2014, p. 3). It is likely that these young girls are victimized by a worldview that they do not deserve respect or the benefit of the doubt in extreme cases. The girls are being judged by values and norms of teachers and administrators who don't share their cultural purview. The cultural gap between educators, parents, and students ought to be bridged if progress is to be made on this front.

Black female students are referred to school administrators and/or law enforcement at a disproportionate rate to their population in schools (Smith & Harper, 2015). As a school administrator, researcher, parent and African-American female, these issues are connected to my personal and professional life and are of particular interest to me. It is my intent to discover the criminalization of these young girls and what efforts can be utilized to bring about a holistic change in how we understand and respond to these behaviors. Schools should be a safe place for children and not a place where their very existence is misunderstood.

African-American girls are 6 times more likely to be suspended from school than their Caucasian counterparts (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) beginning as early as preschool. Historically, schools have been places to develop individuals as citizens and to prepare them for the workforce after high school. With the disparity in response rates to African-American girls in schools, there seems to be a differing standard for these young people than what is normative for their Caucasian peers.

Possible Explanations

A number of articles have been written on the topic of school discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. The pervasive question of why African-descended females are disciplined at higher rates remains to be studied in depth. One possible explanation is a cultural disconnect between these students and their respective teachers. According to the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) (Feistritzer, 2011), in 2011, 84% of K-12 teachers were female and 84% were identified as Caucasian. During this same time period, only 15% of African-descended students were identified in K-12 schools (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This information tells us that students of color are more likely to be taught by those who are racially and culturally dissimilar to them. And though there is no doubt that persons of color can learn from those members of the dominant cultural group, there may exist a cultural disconnect between those teachers and students. Schools of education and state departments of education require certain academic courses to meet certification standards for those planning to teach.

As the population of persons of color is increasing (Ricks, 2014), cultural competence for teachers will become increasingly useful. The National Education Association defines cultural competence as “having an awareness of one’s own cultural identity and views about difference, and the ability to learn and build on the varying cultural and community norms of students and their families” (NEA, 2015, *Why Cultural Competence*, para 3). Without some explicit knowledge and understanding of students’ cultures and norms, the quality of the relationship between teachers and students will likely be disjointed. This could have some direct bearing on how teachers perceive and respond to students in the classroom.

Another possibility is the ideology of those instructors in K-12 settings. Research shows that African American girls have a greater tendency to be praised or reprimanded for classroom social behaviors as opposed to academic behaviors (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). If teachers provide instruction from a perspective that is exclusively White and middle class, students are very likely to suffer both personally and academically. Failing to acknowledge or ignoring the interaction of race, class, and gender as it affects educators and students, will continue to yield a deficit perspective on the experiences of African American students (Evans-Winters, 2007). A deficit perspective or ideology is one that defines and interacts with persons primarily based on what is believed they lack. If teachers have deeply held stereotypical ideas about people of African descent and specifically, African-descended females, the quality of the relationship will likely be an unhealthy one. Persons operating from this vantage point will likely perceive and judge students based on their own cultural norms. Anything that occurs outside of what the educator deems normal per his/her perspective/upbringing will likely be viewed as deviant and will result in a higher rate of referral and disciplinary tactics. As a result, these girls can internalize the teachers’ beliefs about them which can encourage further negative behaviors (Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, & Marshall, 2014). This obviously can create a vicious cycle by which teaching and learning are undermined and therefore

discipline replaces efforts at understanding the disconnect.

Though much of White privilege is underlying and invisible, in many cases it is the standard by which persons of color are measured (Gibson, Wilson, Haight, Kayama, & Marshall, 2014). The concept of white privilege is one that has been at the forefront of conversations about race and racism, institutional and otherwise. White privilege is the benefit that is afforded to Caucasian persons simply based on their race. It is the benefit of the doubt, the presupposition of innocence, the availability of flesh-colored bandages, the ability to buy a home in any neighborhood and/or calling 911 and having an emergency responder arrive in a timely fashion among other benefits. Though these examples are not those that we think of as occurring in a school setting, it is the lack of awareness or failure to acknowledge its existence that can breed institutional racism in a school environment. Choosing to ignore White privilege or imagining it does not exist poses an even greater danger to minority children. Success for those children will not be attained if we discount the idea in favor of blaming particular groups for their lack of accomplishments (Ricks, 2014). When schools are staffed by a primarily Caucasian, female, and middle class personnel, this idea, similar to research bias is compelled to not only be acknowledged but a concerted, daily effort needs to be made to ensure it has minimal to no impact on how the behaviors of these young girls is interpreted. Until such time as we acknowledge and work to minimize and/or eradicate the effects of this concept, it will continue to pervade schools, educators' mindsets and their responses to cultural and/or behavioral differences in the student populace.

African-American males and females experience school and life very differently. Though African-descended males and females have similar challenges in terms of race and racism, the extent to which females experience racism is dissimilar to the males of the same cultural group. Additionally, the manner in which African-descended females face sexism is wholly unlike that of their Caucasian counterparts. As it pertains to racism and sexism Crenshaw (1993) notes, "because of their intersectional identity as both women of color

within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized in both". The notion of intersectionality reminds us that the subjugation of African-American males and females is a complex idea that is often perpetuated in educational environments. Considering its complexity and the underdeveloped understanding of young people, it would stand to reason that these young women may not yet know how to navigate this plain. The question becomes how do we validate young women's notion of self as a complete entity that is not lacking while simultaneously battling the undercurrent of racism and sexism through which her actions are judged.

One survey of superintendents and principals revealed that one of the major challenges faced by new teachers is their inability to maintain control over their classrooms (as cited in Stronge, 2007, p. 39). Research has shown that effective classroom management is one of the indicators of effective teaching. Whether or not teachers are new to the profession, good classroom management can have a positive impact on student achievement. Teachers that have developed regular classroom routines had students that made greater achievement gains (as cited in Stronge, 2007, p. 43). Based on this information, it stands to reason that because less time is spent on managing behaviors, teachers have more time to devote to teaching and learning. In a classroom atmosphere with a strong structure, students likely spend more time on task and less time involved in those detractors of instructional time. Additionally, effective classroom management can lead to the creation and maintenance of a positive learning environment (Stronge, 2007). In a positive learning environment, the teacher has likely reinforced expected classroom behavior and established high expectations for the students. In classrooms where this effort has not yet been mastered, classroom order is probably lacking and thus a higher rate of disciplinary referrals may develop. As students seem to have a natural appreciation for structure and routine, the lack of developed policies and procedures may be a cause for a high number of disciplinary actions for students. In these cases, students may pay a high disciplinary price for a teacher who has yet to master his/her classroom.

Another possible explanation is the notion of African-descended females being judged by the standards of teachers that hold differing views of femininity (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2010). The ideology of femininity as perceived by the dominant culture (White, middle and upper class, heterosexual) is thought to be the most pervasive in the United States (Mahalik et al., 2005). If these young girls are being defined by a standard that does not include their perspective, an unresolved ideological conflict and disciplinary consequences are likely to ensue. In a study of teachers and students in an urban Texas middle school, research found that when cultural styles are contrary to that of the dominant culture it results in irritation and marginalization of the students involved (as cited in Morris, 2005, p. 26).

Every culture has its unique differences. Morris' (2005) study examined schools' effort to shape the behavior of African-American females into what school officials deemed as proper. Many teachers identified these girls' behavior as loud, offensive, and overly sexual and expressed "concern" which manifested itself as reprimands by staff. Morris notes, "Act like a young lady!" was a comment often heard in the halls and classrooms of the middle school by male and female staff members. Though Morris heard this many times, the comment was never directed at Latina, Asian, or Caucasian students but exclusively at Black girls. Morris goes on to note that African-American girls resisted efforts to make them more ladylike by school official's standards. Some teachers tried to discourage these girls from wearing clothing that showed their bodies as teachers deemed this clothing as inappropriate and lacking femininity. Even the Black teachers were known to suggest to these girls behavior that coincided with traditional ideas of femininity. A few teachers went so far as to create a "Proper Ladies" club that honed in on the comportment of African-descended girls. Participants in the club were encouraged to speak in a quieter voice, to be more receptive to authority and on being more passive and silent. The hidden curriculum in this club seemed to be the idea that these girls were somehow flawed in their presentation. This could contribute to a negative self-image and a resistance to the school and its

officials. Further research might include how these projected negative images of how these young ladies carry themselves is connected to disciplinary consequences.

Conclusion

African-American females are being victimized by the K-12 educational system. Overrepresented in disciplinary referrals and consequences, these young women, their teachers and administrators are at odds (Crenshaw, 1993). Faced with the complexities of not fitting into a system that defines them and their behavior as outside of the norm, there is a disconnect. Teachers and administrators are representative of the dominant culture and are measuring African-descended females by their own middle class and Caucasian values. There has to be a reset of a currently failing system. We do a grave injustice to marginalized groups by requiring that they fit into a schema that is not representative of their identity. Taxpayers cannot continue to fund a system that discriminates against its clientele. We are obliged to acknowledge our roles in criminalizing youthful behavior. It is wise to challenge notions of deviant behavior when they don't coincide with our own understanding/perspective. Cultural competence is required of those that are charged with educating and nurturing the next generation (Blake et al., 2010). If this is not a current practice, schools of education in colleges and universities should require coursework and a practicum on teaching those students who come from other cultures or that do not look like them. Schools should be a space for staff and students to exist and interact positively and effectively.

Teachers have very difficult jobs. The days of teaching majority White students is diminishing. Though African descended students currently comprise 13% of the population, females of color, which includes those of African descent, will comprise approximately 53% of the U.S. population by the year 2050 (as cited in Ricks, 2014). Teachers are expected to have a stronghold on content knowledge, develop a professional rapport with students and families, write lesson plans that include differentiation for the various learners, develop a classroom management plan that leads to

a positive learning environment, spur growth in all students, be culturally competent, acknowledge and work to minimize and/or eliminate the effects of White privilege, and to ensure their professional ideology is in alignment with that of an effective teacher. Though it is not easy, it is necessary. With the right amount of support and high expectations, like students, teachers can and will rise to the occasion.

Operating schools today with a business as usual attitude is ineffective, at best. The change that is required of all of us begins with us. It is our duty to require more of ourselves as examples to our youth. Youthful behavior ought not to be a proxy for criminal behavior. Teaching and learning includes a great deal more than academic content. Penalizing African-American females at a rate of 6:1 is indicative not of the students failure but of our own failure as adults (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). What we choose to do now will shape teachers and students for generations to come. History is continuously being made and if we are careful, we will be on the right side of it.

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