

Chapter 3

All My Life I Had to Fight: The Disproportionate Impact of School Disciplinary Policies on Black Girls in K–12 Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, a large body of research has documented the effects of school disciplinary policies and practices on Black males. As a result of this overemphasis on the educational plight and experiences of Black males in schools, very few studies have examined the impact of school discipline policies and practices on Black females. Given the absence of discourse about this issue, it is often assumed or taken for granted by many researchers and teachers that Black females receive equitable educational opportunities as other student populations. Using data from five large urban school districts, this chapter argues that the formal and informal disciplinary policies and systems in many schools and classrooms in the United States have a disproportionately negative impact on Black girls. Recommendations for administrators, teachers, and other key school officials are presented.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4960-4.ch003

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, a large body of research has documented the effects of school disciplinary policies and practices on Black males (e.g., Monroe, 2005; Morris, 2005; Skiba et al., 2002.) As a result of this overemphasis on the educational plight and experience of Black males in schools, few studies have examined the impact of school disciplinary policies and practices on Black females. Consequently, very little is known about the degree to which Black females are suspended or expelled from schools when compared to girls from other racial backgrounds. Even more so, this lack of emphasis in scholarly literature has led many to assume that Black girls are not being negatively impacted by the disciplinary policies and practices in many schools. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of disciplinary policies on Black females in multiple school districts in the United States. In addition to “fighting” other forces (e.g., testing, tracking, teaching, etc.) at school that work against their educational and social success, this chapter argues that Black girls also have to fight against the disciplinary policies in most schools and classrooms during their K-12 school years. Drawing from recent data (2011-2012) from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, this chapter discusses the degree to which Black girls were suspended in five large urban school districts in the United States. More specifically, this chapter examines the suspension rates of Black girls in relationship to the suspension rates of girls and boys from other racial backgrounds. The overarching research question that drives this study is: How often were Black females suspended and expelled in comparison to other student groups? The secondary research question is: To what degree were Black girls suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates than other student populations?

This study is significant because most of the extant research surrounding students of color and disciplinary policies and practices centers on the experiences of Black and Hispanic boys. Very few studies have highlighted the experiences of Black girls. Consequently, the findings from this study provide insight that is missing from the current scholarship on this topic. Furthermore, these findings will expand the current scholarly discourse related to how to better meet the needs of Black girls in schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disciplinary Practices and Black Girls in K-12 Contexts

A relatively small and growing body of research has begun to examine the outcomes of disciplinary practices in schools on Black girls (African American Policy Forum and Columbia Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2014; Black et al., 2011; Crenshaw, 2012; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Women’s Law Center, 2014; Morris, 2012; Morris, 2016; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Essentially, two overlapping categories of scholarship exist within this larger body of research. The first category examines the rates at which Black girls are being disciplined in schools. Research strongly suggests that Black girls are being disciplined at far greater rates than White and Hispanic girls (Black et al., 2011; Crenshaw, 2012; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and National Women’s Law Center, 2014; Morris, 2012; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Taylor & Foster, 1986). For instance, a recent study conducted by Kimberle Crenshaw

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