CASE STUDY III: BLACK GIRLS PUSHED OUT OF SCHOOL

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EDUE 703: Power, Diversity, & Equity

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April 5, 2020

Introduction

School, no matter what grade level, is supposed to be a safe place where students can learn, explore their identities, seek guidance, and connect with others. Unfortunately, this is not the case for Black girls in the United States educational system. In this system, Black girls are disproportionately pushed out of their classrooms and schools at a higher rate than any other race (Morris, 2018). Black girls are not pushed out because they are a threat to the safety of the school, but because America's schools are still a place of marginalization and punishment (Morris, 2018). Instead of understanding the dynamics that contribute to Black girls' experiences in society, such as their intersectionality and adverse childhood experiences, schools across the nation are resulting in over policing at high rates.

Background

Kimberle' Crenshaw (1989) first introduced the term intersectionality in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Crenshaw described intersectionality as a framework to trace the impact of racism, sexism, and other modes of discrimination, where they come together and create sometimes unique circumstances, obstacles, and barriers for people who are subject to these things (Bell, 2016). Intersectionality still contributes to educators' misunderstanding of how to educate and respond to students who find themselves at the intersection of various marginalized groups, such as Black girls. By not understanding Black girls' experiences in their environments – recognizing that race-, gender- and class-related circumstances are contributing to their behaviors – Black girls will continue to be disciplined at disproportionate rates.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, California's first Surgeon General, has spent her career understanding how children's adverse childhood experiences are contributing factors to toxic stress and prominent health issues. Exposure to childhood adversity includes, abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction such as domestic violence, parental mental illness, or parental substance abuse. Increased childhood exposure to these types of stressors, without the buffering care of a supportive adult, can change children's brains and bodies, including disrupting learning, behavior, immunity, growth, and more (Center for Youth Wellness, n.d.). Black girls, especially those who reside in communities with severe socioeconomic issues, are more susceptible to adverse experiences resulting in behavioral issues.

Instead of educators understanding, protecting, and healing Black girls, they are contributing to their overrepresentation on the discipline continuum. Morris (2018) stated Black girls are seven times more likely than their White peers to be suspended and three times more likely than their White and Latino peers to be referred to juvenile court. School-aged girls are being arrested for nonviolent issues such as having a tantrum. Middle school girls are being taken away from their school because of their hair style. Additionally, high school girls are experiencing violence at the hands of law enforcement on school grounds (Morris, 2018).

Evaluation

Black girls' adverse childhood experiences change their physiology and may result in a need to act out; but unfortunately, many educators do not see a cry for help or a plea for a safe space, they only see a "problem child" (TED, 2014; TED, 2018). The uncalculated and harsh responses to behavior, coupled with the children's ACE scores, contribute to their feelings of a lack of safety in school. This feeling, in turn, causes young girls to act out in normal fight or

flight manner: they protest, argue, run away, or remain silent (TED, 2018). The behavior that educators are seeing is a direct result of the adverse child experiences of the girls they are called to protect.

Currently, and surprisingly, there are very few solutions to this issue. Various schools across the country have adapted non-exclusionary disciplinary practices such as restorative justice and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). Although a good start, both solutions are insufficient by themselves; they are mostly reactive in nature. Restorative justice methods are similar to those of the criminal justice system; they focus on restoring the community by repairing the harm caused by the misbehavior. (Macready, 2009 as cited in Payne & Welch, 2015). One limitation to the effectiveness of restorative justice is the possibility of a limited scope. Morrison (2005) argued that unless schools and educators change their view of discipline, restorative justice methods will not be fully successful. Educators must subsist in viewing discipline as reactionary and punitive and instead recognize the child's plea for help, seize the opportunity to teach students how their behavior affects the larger community, and consider alternative responses to their triggers (as cited in Payne & Welch, 2015).

Similarly, PBIS may fall short if not coupled with a holistic approach to discipline and education as a whole. Unlike restorative justice, PBIS is meant to be proactive and positive in nature. It is a system created by the school and its stakeholders to acknowledge and promote positive behavior. However, Sandomierski (2011) found that even in schools who implemented PBIS, Black students remained over-represented in discipline. Unfortunately, the study did not disaggregate the data to consider the intersectionality of Black girls. However, this study points to an additional issue of implicit bias that may continue to affect disciplinary actions if not

properly addressed. Further research would need to be completed in order to better understand this issue.

Solution

Despite the limitations of PBIS and Restorative Justice, the Columbus City Preparatory School for Girls has a more comprehensive approach. Lasting and efficacious change within the educational system must first begin with an interrogation of educators as well as the system and end with a paradigm shift away from the traditional power dynamics of school and toward a more inclusive approach that acknowledges and confronts oppression in all forms (Douglas & Nganga, 2015; Morrison et al., 2005; Atlas, 2020). The Columbus Preparatory School for girls has done so with the following actions and more. The school has:

- ○ Built out robust alternatives to suspension

- ○ Implemented Restorative Justice

- ○ Designated space to regroup, if needed

- ○ Ensured that the girls start every day with a promotion of self-worth, communication skills, and goal-setting

- ○ Responded to adverse child experiences rather than ignore them

- ○ Implemented arts, mindfulness, meditation, etc. as practices to heal in order to learn

    (TED, 2018; Atlas, 2020)

Through their work, Columbus City Preparatory School for Girls has seen a 92% decrease in bullying violations, 78% decrease in insubordination violations, an 84% decrease in fighting

violations, and 84-100% decrease in OSS for all such violations (Atlas, 2020). Their success demonstrates that the work can be done.

The success of Columbus City Preparatory School for Girls may come as no surprise to authors Douglas and Nganga (2015) who argued that pedagogues must "relinquish oppressive practices in the classroom" and "utilize dialogue as a means of subverting dominant positionalities" as a commitment to radical love (p. 64).

Paulo Freire (1987) also called on educators to resist the dehumanizing structures and practices of schools through reinvention of the world that places courageous love at the center of learning and teaching (as cited in Cariaga, 2019). To meet Freire's call, Cariaga (2019), a school teacher in Los Angeles, implemented an elective class called Young Women Rise, where students learned to navigate their developing identities through a curriculum that combined emotional literacy, critical pedagogy, and women's studies (p. 102). This self-recovery elective class differed from traditional pedagogies because it offered girls the opportunity to embrace their wholeness, including healing their wounds.

Recommendation

Before implementing radical love through comprehensive actions and a subversion of power politics in schools, educators must begin with introspection and an interrogation of one's own positionalities and biases (Douglas & Nganga, 2015; Kumar, Zusho, & Bondie, 2018). One must understand their own role in perpetuating the system that marginalizes Black girls. For, if this fundamental shift does not occur, schools may find themselves limited by the same issues of PBIS and restorative justice practices; any solution can be tainted by uninterrogated implicit biases.

For lasting change teacher education programs can no longer only acknowledge teaching strategies, they must also require self-reflection and teach how to identify, acknowledge, and change oppressive practices. It is at this point that teachers should be able to truly teach Black girls in the way they need. For as one student explained, "You just got to love and support them. That's all they really need. Love and support" (Atlas, 2020).

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