

Black girls overrepresented in confinement and court placement

Written by Monique W. Morris
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Nationwide, African American girls continue to be disproportionately over-represented among girls in confinement and court-ordered residential placements. They are also significantly over-represented among girls who experience exclusionary discipline, such as out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and other punishment. Studies have shown that Black female disengagement from school partially results from racial injustices as well as their status as girls, forming disciplinary patterns that reflect horrendously misinformed and stereotypical perceptions.

While academic underperformance and zero tolerance policies are certainly critical components of pathways to confinement, a closer examination reveals that Black girls may also be criminalized for qualities long associated with their survival. For example, being "loud" or "defiant" are infractions potentially leading to subjective reprimanding or exclusionary discipline. But historically, these characteristics can exemplify their responses to the effects of racism, sexism, and classism.

More than 42,000 youth were educated in "juvenile court schools" located in California correctional and detention facilities in 2012, according to the California Department of Education, and a disproportionate number of them were Black girls. In the state's 10 largest districts by enrollment, Black females experience school suspension at rates that far surpass their female counterparts of other racial and ethnic groups. Little has been shared about these girls' educational histories and experiences inside the state's juvenile correctional facilities or

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out in the community.

As a response, I conducted an exploratory, phenomenological, action research study that examined the self-identified, educational experiences of Northern California's Black girls in confinement using in-depth interviews and descriptive data analysis, among other research activities. The study revealed the following about the educational experiences of confined Black girls in Northern California:

- They value their education. Ninety-four percent of the girls in this study reported their education to be either very important or important to them, and nearly as many said their education was equally as important to their parents or guardians, where applicable.
- They have a history of exclusionary discipline in their district schools. Eighty-eight percent had a history of suspension, and 65 percent had a history of expulsion from non-juvenile court schools; half cited elementary school as their earliest experience with suspension or expulsion.
- They experience exclusionary discipline while in detention, too. Almost all had been removed from a juvenile court school classroom, and one-third of these girls believed it was because they simply asked the teacher a question. Two-thirds reported it was the result of "talking back" - but in each case, the student felt she was responding to an unprompted, negative comment made by the teacher. One participant recalled, "She called me retarded in front of the class...I have a learning disability."
- They have missed a lot of school. The majority reported having recently missed at least 2 weeks of instruction. Among these girls who missed significant portions of school, 36 percent had removed their court-ordered electronic monitoring device and/or were "on the run" and avoiding a warrant for their arrest. Fourteen percent cited prostitution as a major deterrence from attending or participating in school. For 18 percent, mothering a child under the age of 3 years old made attending school difficult. Over half reported they had been expelled from or had "dropped out" of school.
- They have drug use and/or dependency issues. Almost all of the girls in this study admitted to a history of smoking marijuana, and 65 percent reported doing so at or just before going to school. Among these girls, 64 percent reported their teachers knew they were high in class - all said there was no action taken by the school.
- Many of them lack confidence in their teachers. Nearly 60 percent reported a lack of confidence in the teaching ability and/or commitment of at least one instructor in their school, and almost half perceived a teacher routinely refusing to answer specific questions about the material they were learning.
- They are not engaged. The majority found the coursework to be too easy and perceived it as below their grade level.
- Their school credits do not transfer seamlessly between juvenile court schools and district schools. Most reported a prior experience in the juvenile court school where this study took

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place. Among these girls, 57 percent believed that the credits they earned while in detention had not transferred appropriately to their district school; the majority were unsure of their credit status.

- They have goals, but they don't know how to reach them. Eighty-eight percent had ideas of their occupational goals, with one-third indicating they would like to be a staff counselor at the juvenile hall. However, 73 percent felt their education was not preparing them for their future.

This study's findings show where future research and advocacy efforts might better interrogate the effects of inferior and hyper-punitive nature of these schools.

Notwithstanding their status as "juvenile delinquents" with significant histories of victimization, these girls tended to find a potentially redemptive quality in education. Though most of the girls in this study did not consider their juvenile court school to be a model learning environment, they generally agreed these schools occupy an important space along a learning continuum that has underserved them. For many of these girls, the figurative lacerations from bureaucratic and ethical failures may leave lasting marks.

While our ultimate goal is to prevent more girls from being educated in correctional facilities, these schools should be included in the conversation about equity, not only because are they structurally inferior and failing to interrupt student pathways to dropout or push-out, but because there is a moral and legal obligation to improve the quality of education for all youth - even those who are in trouble with the law. We must continue to explore ways for access to quality education in these facilities more equitable, while improving the rigor of the curricula, such that it is trauma-informed and culturally competent. We must also examine ways to facilitate a seamless reentry of these girls back into their district schools and home communities.

Thurgood Marshall wrote in *Procunier v. Martinez* (1974), "When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization concluded."

It is a long-standing American value that education is a potential tool to restructure social hierarchies and elevate the conditions of historically oppressed peoples. However, current trends in the administration and function of the juvenile court school may exacerbate many pre-existing conflicts between Black girls and teachers and/or the structure of learning environments. The limitations and challenges of these conditions may nullify the opportunities for improved associations between Black girls, school, and academic performance - antithetical to the stated educational goal of the juvenile court school.

If we can improve the accountability and performance of these schools alongside their district counterparts, we will inevitably move toward a more comprehensive approach to reducing the impact of policies and practices that criminalize and push girls out of school. We will, in essence, begin the process of maintaining her human quality - an essential component of her successful rehabilitation and re-engagement as a productive member of our communities.