

2017-2018 WTU Teacher Leaders
Black Girls Matter: A Portrait of Climate and Culture in Schools
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Rationale

There is a powerful discourse taking shape that represent dominant ideologies of race and gender against the backdrop of proposed cuts of \$9 billion to the Department of Education—including rolling back the critical federal regulation “Rethinking Discipline,” cemented in 2014. Present day research is widening the lens related to inequality, as well as, intersectionalities operating on multiple levels involving Black boys—starting in school. Research purports the link between punitive disciplinary measures and low achievement due to lost instruction time. Within this context, Black girls’ experiences, remain unnoticed and uninvestigated silencing issues of racism and sexism seriously affecting Black girls in schools. This silence supports multidimensional and cross-institutional bias involved in research, policy, and advocacy, and most importantly, identity. As concern mounts for the needs of Black boys, we must challenge the assumption that Black girls’ left out of the national conversation, are also at risk.

Invisibility and hyper-visibility: super powers imposed on Black girls, are magnified during today’s harsh social climate, yet, the needs and policies that affect them the most are often forgotten and/or dismissed. This is especially true regarding marginalized students who are at risk for school failure, reflected in research and the achievement gap. Given the importance to girls’ adolescent development, and, the formative role the school setting provides in life... this research study presents a holistic view of the Black girl phenomenon, examining the work of school climate and culture by centering Black girls’ academic identities, self-theory, achievement indicators, agency-beliefs, motivation and dispositions.

Literature Review

After reviewing research on Black girl students, most of the existing research excludes Black girls and other girls of color leading many stakeholders to infer that Black girls are not at risk, and, dismiss the call to action to make Black girls a priority (Blake et al., 2017). The latest research from the U.S. Department of Education reported that Black girls were suspended six times more than students of the same gender, as well as, expelled more than any other group (U. S. Department of Education, 2015). The District of Columbia Public Schools, Equity Reports in the 2015-16 school year reported that all students expelled during the school year were either Black or Hispanic. However, Black students make up less than 70% of the students enrolled in 2015-16 school year, yet, 97% of the students expelled (<https://osse.dc.gov>). And, Black girl students are being pushed out of the classroom by suspension 20.8 times more likely than other of the same gender (<https://nwlc.org>).

According to research, Black girls experience many overlapping barriers to succeeding in school including racial and gender stereotypes that portray them as loud, confrontational, assertive, and provocative, to under-resourced schools with less experienced teachers that are not culturally competent enabling ineffective instructional practices that can negatively impact Black girls educational experiences and future earning potential (Morris, 2014).

Black girl students need robust instructional strategies embedded with culturally sensitive curricula, in addition to, educators and stakeholders that are sensitive and responsive to their unique differences.

Data/Tools/Process

This study provides a holistic framework for analysis. The Holistic Student Perception Survey was developed and disseminated to approximately 75 Black girls attending middle school grades (6-8), and high school grades (9-12), in 4 quadrants of Washington, DC. The study began March 2018 and continued until April 2015. Participants were provided an introductory and explanatory letter defining the purposes and context of the survey. Most important, a confidentiality statement was provided and participants were not allowed to place their name on the survey to remain anonymous.

Results indicate that holistic student perception assessment was achieved as measured using a creative combination of the following survey instruments: (a) Tripod Survey, (b) My Student Survey, (c) Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey to investigate resilience, and (d) in person interviews (based on random selection). The time taken to complete the survey was estimated to be approximately 15 to 20 minutes, administered in paper and electronic format, based on student preferences. The survey included 18 questions: three for demographic purposes, five on classroom observations; five on school observations; and five on Social and Emotional Well-being. Each question allowed the respondent to choose from four answers which included 'Strongly Disagree,' 'Somewhat Disagree,' 'Somewhat Agree,' and 'Strongly Agree.'

Data Analysis

Approximately, 100 Black girls were targeted for the survey, and a total of 75 voluntary responded. The grade level of the 75 respondents consisted of: 52 percent are classified high school students and 25 percent as middle school students. Semi-structured interviews were designed to engage students in the inquiry, and, included interview question categories centering: lived experiences, social life, teacher interaction, and school climate.

Data captured the following student perceptions through structured questions and self-reflection. When asked how much do they perceive their school culture to be positive, 35 percent responded somewhat agree, while 25 percent responded disagree, and 12 percent of the respondents didn't answer. In regard to their perceptions of teachers' cultural awareness about Black girls' 28 percent "strongly agreed" teachers were culturally responsive; 15 percent "somewhat agreed" 20 percent disagreed; and, 2 percent didn't respond.

Regarding students attitude about their school climate 30 percent strongly agreed they felt safe at school; 22 percent somewhat agreed; while 25 percent strongly disagreed; and 10 percent had no response. Overall, most respondents reported during the in person interviews that there is excessive disciplinary actions against them when compared to other students. And, the survey showed that being called a racial slur is a common experience shared by Black girls.

Recommendations

Given the important results of this study, additional research is needed to examine risk factors, school climate, teacher engagement, and, student aspirations for furthering knowledge and directing meaningful interventions. The implementation of a Social and Emotional Well-being Task Force would be helpful to conduct a study with a larger population size targeting Black girls from surrounding school districts to find both differences and similarities in experiences of Black girls in school, to further diversify research efforts, and to increase the focus of Black girls. Another possibility would be the implementation of a school level climate focusing on cultural competence training for teachers including robust instruction that engage Black girls' lived experiences. Particularly, using culturally diverse, gender inclusive curriculums that integrate the arts that include historical narratives, images, and positive cultural norms that reflect and uplift Black girls in the classroom.

Ultimately, exposure is paramount for all learners. Thus, creating healing-informed learning spaces will assist in developing healthy, gender responsive "safe spaces" of learning placing an emphasis on developing positive relationships among Black girls, teachers, and their peers. A key goal of education is to teach all students to have a voice, to be critical thinkers, and, to, problematize negative stereotypes operating in society. Thus, despite challenges...Black girls continue to seek ways to identify and deconstruct the prevalence of stereotypes that adversely impact their educational experiences, and, wellbeing.

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