The "System" Was Never for Us: Redefining Middle School Discipline to Empower Black Girls

Kenesha Johnson
Claflin University, kenejohnson@claflin.edu

Dywanna Smith
Claflin University, dysmith@claflin.edu

Kamryn Griffin
Claflin University, kagriffin@claflin.edu

Jada Williams
Claflin University, jadwilliams@claflin.edu

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Dr. Kenesha Johnson
kenejohnson@claflin.edu
Claflin University, School of Education

Dr. Dywanna Smith
dysmith@claflin.edu
Claflin University, School of Education

Kamryn Griffin
kagriffin@claflin.edu
Claflin University, School of Education

Jada Williams
jadwilliams@claflin.edu
Claflin University, School of Education

Abstract: This manuscript addresses the need for a transformative redefinition of school discipline, focused on empowering Black girls. It highlights the heightened likelihood of suspension and expulsion faced by Black girls, exposing flaws in traditional practices. Advocating for a paradigm shift, the manuscript emphasizes adopting restorative practices, centered on healing and collaboration to address behavioral issues at their core. It explores the impact of implicit biases and systemic racism on Black girls' experiences, proposing a comprehensive, inclusive approach. Through transformative measures, schools create environments that actively empowers and supports the academic journey of Black girls, fostering a more equitable educational experience.

Keywords: school discipline, restorative justice, racial disparities, implicit bias, empowerment of Black girls

Introduction

In the realm of education, where fairness should reign, a glaring truth surfaces: the system meant for all students doesn't quite fit the unique challenges faced by Black girls. Historically, Black students, particularly Black girls, face disproportionate discipline and punishment in school settings; they are often labeled as disobedient or defiant by school personnel with a limited understanding of how race and racism impact their lives (Annamma, Anyon, Joseph, Farrar, Greer, Downing, & Simmons, 2019; Blad & Harwin, 2017; Cherng, 2017; Morris, 2019). This often leads to negative consequences for their academic and socio-emotional development, making Black girls vulnerable to the life-long consequences of dropping out of school (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Morris, 2016).

Black girls encounter a disproportionately higher likelihood of facing suspension and expulsion when compared to their peers of the same gender (Annamma et al., 2019). While existing research acknowledges the shared racialized risk of punitive measures for both Black boys and girls in educational settings, the distinctive challenges faced by Black female students remain notably absent from advocacy efforts concerning school achievement (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

The well-documented prevalence of racial disparities in school discipline often fails to spotlight the pronounced inequity experienced by Black girls; this silence is supported by data collection and reporting methods that commonly overlook the crucial intersection of race and gender (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Carter Andrews, Brown, Castro, & Id-Deen, 2019; Morris, 2019). Reports that scrutinize data to unveil the status of boys frequently neglect to present parallel information for girls, inadvertently fostering the misconception among key stakeholders that Black girls encounter fewer race-related obstacles within the educational system (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2019). It is essential to address the unique struggles faced by Black girls and advocate for tailored interventions to redefine middle school discipline in a manner that empowers and supports their academic journey (AMLE, 2021; Cherng, 2017).

In the ongoing discourse surrounding educational equity, it becomes increasingly evident that the prevailing disciplinary systems within middle schools often fail to address the challenges faced by Black girls (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Smith, 2022). This manuscript delves into the intersection of race and gender, shedding light on the disparities and inadequacies present in traditional disciplinary approaches and aims to challenge the status quo, by advocating for a transformative shift that recognizes and supports the diverse experiences of Black girls in middle schools. Such a shift requires redefining discipline through a lens of empowerment; seeking to cultivate a more inclusive and just educational environment for all students, thereby acknowledging and affirming their racial and gender identities.

Unique Challenges Faced by Black Girls

Navigating adolescence as a Black girl within a societal framework dominated by Eurocentric standards, presents distinctive challenges, creating a dynamic that is often difficult for others to comprehend (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The middle school phase, acknowledged as a demanding period for all students (AMLE, 2021), further complicates the experience as minds and bodies undergo simultaneous and multifaceted changes that middle school students find difficult to comprehend (AMLE, 2021). This places individuals in the

paradox of being perceived as mature in certain aspects while still deemed too young in others. Black girls, in particular, contend with adultification or the pervasive assumptions that they are attempting to appear older or more mature than their age suggests (African American Policy Forum, 2015; Annamma et al., 2019; French, 2012). This perception, particularly concerning their sexuality, reinforces stigmatizing notions, implying a sense of shame associated with their perceived sexualization (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; French, 2012)). External perspectives frequently cast Black girls as hypersexualized figures, reinforcing harmful stereotypes such as oversexed vixens, teenage mothers, and carriers of sexually transmitted infections (French, 2012). The rapid shift from childhood to being perceived as a sexual being is a challenging experience commonly faced by Black girls. From contending with pervasive stereotypes and biases to facing disciplinary disparities, the journey for Black girls is challenged with obstacles that demand attention and intervention. Cultural expectations and the pressure to reconcile societal norms with personal identity further intensify their experiences (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2009). The development of a positive self-image becomes a delicate task amid societal pressures and identity exploration (French, 2012). Microaggressions, subtle yet impactful expressions of bias, add an additional layer of complexity to Black girls' middle school experiences (Cherng, 2017). Recognizing and addressing these challenges is imperative for fostering an educational environment that not only acknowledges the unique struggles of Black girls but actively supports their holistic development and academic success.

Disparities in Disciplinary Practices

Black girls, in the United States, often fall victim to disciplinary disparities compared to their white counterparts; in too many situations, Black girls receive a consequence that is often disproportionate to the behavior (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011). Black students are disproportionately represented in schools with police presence, both at the middle school and high school levels; Black students are nearly 10 times more likely to attend a school with a law enforcement officer compared to their white counterparts (Bled & Harwin, 2017). The disproportionate representation of Black students in school arrests is likely due to their typically being in the minority among school populations (Bled & Harwin, 2017). Even increasingly harmful, these students are disciplined at disproportionate levels (Blake et al., 2011). On average, Black girls faced significantly higher rates of discipline, being disciplined ten times more, expelled 53 times more, and suspended ten times more than their white counterparts (African American Policy Forum, 2015; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016). Black girls bear the brunt of under-resourced school districts in their disciplinary practices, particularly affecting all young Black students, and more specifically Black girls who often grapple with the intersection of racial and gender biases within a societal context that perceives them as a marginalized gender minority (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Crenshaw et al., 2015; Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Morris, 2016).

Although research on the causes of these disparities is still in the early stages, implicit biases and results of stereotyping are two very likely reasons (Alinia, 2015; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Teachers might be unaware of the mainstream Western cultural implications that they inflict upon Black students (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Leafgren, 2012; Morris, 2019). For example, encouraging Black girls to "adopt more 'acceptable' qualities of feminists such as being…more passive" (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Likely because Black girls are more likely to be seen as excessively loud, they might fall victim to stereotypes and face discipline for not following behaviors traditionally outlined by Eurocentric standards (Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Irrespective of the reasons, stakeholders working in a school setting should be mindful of the disparities in disciplinary practices, recognizing and addressing their own personal biases to ensure the equity of their disciplinary approaches.

Redefinition of Discipline

In the evolving landscape of education, the conventional paradigms governing school discipline are under scrutiny as we confront the need for a transformative redefinition (Leafgren, 2012). The traditional punitive measures, rooted in exclusionary practices, have proven not only inequitable but detrimental to the overall educational experience of Black girls (Blake et al., 2011; Leafgren, 2012)). Discipline should be viewed as a means to teach and guide students rather than merely as a system for punishment (AMLE, 2021). It is within this context that the call for a redefined approach gains resonance, urging educators and policymakers to reconsider disciplinary frameworks. The essence of this paradigm shift lies in embracing safe spaces, and restorative justice practices that prioritize healing, understanding, and collaboration over punitive measures (Smith, 2022). The journey toward redefinition encompasses a holistic examination of the root causes of behavioral issues, coupled with an acknowledgment of the pervasive influence of implicit biases and systemic racism (Alinia, 2015; Blake et al., 2011). As schools embark on this transformative endeavor, the goal is clear: to foster an inclusive, empowering, and supportive environment within our schools, ensuring that every student, irrespective of their background, can thrive and succeed (AMLE, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Schools' discipline must undergo a reformed approach to student behavior and discipline tactics, moving beyond traditional exclusionary practices (Blad & Harwin, 2017; Leafgren, 2012; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). The adoption of restorative justice practices emphasizes the importance of repairing harm and cultivating positive relationships between students and school staff (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Homrich-Knieling, 2022; Klevan, 2021). In this perspective, discipline becomes a joint effort, focusing on understanding and tackling the root causes of behavioral issues (Annamma et al., 2016; Klevan, 2021). Educators are provided with the necessary training and resources that not only covers the practical aspects of implementing restorative justice, but also addresses implicit biases (Homrich-Knieling, 2022). Crucially, restorative justice practices seek to deepen educators' understanding of how race and racism significantly influence

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the experiences of Black girls in the school environment (Annamma et al., 2016; Klevan, 2021). Discipline practices such as these provide a comprehensive and inclusive approach to redefine middle school discipline, aiming to create an environment that empowers and supports Black girls throughout their educational journey.

Redefining discipline for Black girls within the framework of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* necessitates a comprehensive and tailored approach that acknowledges the unique intersectionality of their experiences (AMLE, 2021). Guided by the principles of *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe*, discipline should transcend punitive measures, shifting toward restorative justice practices that prioritize empathy, understanding, and collaboration (AMLE, 2021; Klevan, 2021). The commitment to fostering a positive and inclusive school culture requires educators to actively address implicit biases, dismantling stereotypes that disproportionately affect Black girls (Smith, 2022). This approach is executed by prioritizing relationships and acknowledging the impact of systemic racism on their educational journey (Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995), the redefined discipline approach aligns with AMLE's emphasis on promoting equity, social justice, and the holistic development of every student (AMLE, 2021). This transformative approach seeks to empower Black girls by creating an educational environment that embraces diversity, celebrates individual strengths, and provides the necessary support for their academic and personal growth.

Empowerment Strategies

Middle school is a period marked by transitions, both physical and emotional, as young individuals strive to find their place in the world (AMLE, 2021). For Black girls, these transitions can be compounded by factors such as racial identity development, cultural nuances, and societal expectations (Blake et al., 2011; Carter Andrews et al., 2019). To address these challenges and unlock their full potential, it is crucial for educators to implement strategies that not only acknowledge the specific experiences of Black girls but also provide them with the tools to navigate and overcome obstacles. From fostering a positive self-image and promoting cultural pride, to building resilience in the face of adversity (Ladson-Billings, 1995), the goal is to equip young Black girls with the skills and mindset needed to navigate the complexities of adolescence with grace, strength, and resilience.

There is a pressing need to expand existing opportunities for the inclusion of Black girls and other girls of color in policy research, advocacy, and programmatic interventions (Annamma et al., 2016; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Emphasizing the importance of equitable funding, it is crucial to ensure support for the specific needs of women and girls alongside those of men and boys. Simultaneously, there is a growing demand for the development of strategies that prioritize the safety of Black girls without an overreliance on punitive interventions (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Achieving this requires comprehensive teacher and staff training in schools, encompassing historical and contemporary dimensions of racism, equity, oppression, and power dynamics (Alinia, 2015;

Annamma et al., 2016). Training should prioritize addressing educators' personal biases and dismantling stereotypes about Black girls (Homrich-Knieling, 2022). Instead of relying on disciplinary exclusion rooted in Eurocentric standards, educators are encouraged to adopt alternative perspectives; viewing Black girls as powerful and assertive individuals, capable of problem-solving with savvy and ingenuity, to foster a more inclusive and empowering educational environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Additionally, educators must actively listen to the narratives of Black girls and place their experiences at the forefront of policy discussions (Annamma et al., 2016; Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Educators must acknowledge the crisis faced by youth of color and advocate for a commitment to expanding both conversations and resources essential for addressing these critical concerns (Crenshaw et al., 2015). In essence, a holistic and inclusive approach, recognizes and rectifies systemic disparities to create a more safe, just, and supportive environment for Black girls (Smith, 2022).

> *This redefined discipline approach aligns with AMLE's emphasis on promoting equity, social justice, and the holistic development of every student (AMLE, 2021)*

Conclusion

The exploration of empowerment strategies for middle school Black girls reveals not only the resilience and strength these students embody but also the need for systemic change in discipline practices. By recognizing and addressing the intersectional challenges of race and gender, the emphasis here is on the importance of tailored strategies that go beyond conventional approaches (Blake et al., 2011; Crenshaw et al., 2015). The empowerment of Black girls in middle school is not solely an academic pursuit; it is a call to dismantle historical disparities and create a transformative educational experience. It is evident that true empowerment requires ongoing commitment and collaboration (Klevan, 2021). Schools, educators, policymakers, and communities must work in unison to implement and sustain these strategies, fostering an environment where the potential of every middle school Black girl is not only acknowledged but actively cultivated.

In moving forward, this manuscript serves as a foundation for broader conversations and actions aimed at redefining the middle school experience for Black girls. By prioritizing empowerment, we sow the seeds for a future where every Black girl can navigate the challenges of adolescence with resilience and self-assurance. The journey toward equity and inclusivity demands continued advocacy, policy reform, and cultural shifts. These results stand as a testament to the potential for positive change, urging stakeholders at every level to embrace empowerment strategies that uplift and support the unique aspirations of middle school Black girls. Only through sustained commitment can we collectively pave

the way for an educational landscape that not only recognizes the inherent worth of Black girls but actively propels them toward a future of limitless possibilities.

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About the Authors

Kenesha Johnson
Kenesha Johnson is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Claflin University. Kenesha's research focuses on the racial disparities in literacies and the educational system while providing teachers with research-based practices for diverse learners. She has presented locally and nationally on these subjects.

Kamryn Griffin
Kamryn Griffin is a sophomore Mathematics Education Major at Claflin University. Kamryn's research focuses on equity and inclusion, and creating learning spaces to meet the needs of diverse learners. She is deeply committed to the transformative power of education.

Dywanna Smith
Dywanna Smith is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Claflin University. As a scholar-educator, Dywanna's research examines the intersections of race, literacies, and education and equipping teachers with equity pedagogies to successfully teach linguistically and culturally diverse students. She has presented nationally and internationally on these subjects. Her book, *Transformational Sanctuaries in the Middle Level ELA Classroom: Creating Truth Spaces for Black Girls,* is available on Amazon.

Jada Williams
Jada Williams is a sophomore Middle Level Education Major at Claflin University. Jada's research focuses on fostering inclusive and engaging learning environments. She is dedicated to empowering young minds through education and making a positive impact in the lives of middle school students.

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