

CENTERING BLACK ADOLESCENT GIRLS' VOICES: STRATEGIES TO PREVENT DISPROPORTIONATE DISCIPLINE (PART II)



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Suggested Audience: For educational leaders

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This brief addresses how Educational Psychology can support equitable learning experiences through positive identity development.


KEY FACTS AND STATISTICSⁱ

- School disciplinary structures and policies play a role in the persistence of inequitable treatment.
- District-level discipline data disaggregated by both race and gender show Black girls are disproportionately excluded from learning through office referrals, in- and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions.
- Discipline referrals disproportionately categorize Black girls' violations as: "disobedience," "defiance," "unwillingness to submit to authority," "disruptive behavior," "dress code violations," and "improper dress."
- Discipline referrals do not capture verbal warnings that also shape Black girls' experiences at school.

BLACK ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EXPERIENCES OF BIAS IN SCHOOL CONTEXTSⁱⁱ

Black adolescent girls feel less connected to school when their identities are not reflected:

- **in class** when teachers do not include readings with Black female characters, minimize the horrors of slavery, or only focus on a few people related to Black history (e.g., Rosa Parks)
- **in school** when there are few Black teachers, Black History Month celebrations, or ethnic studies classes
- **interpersonally** when adults make comments about or touch Black girls' physical features




What bothers me about Math the most is when I'm reading word problems, they use like the weirdest names that don't even make sense... It's always Sarah. Sarah is like the most classic name ever. (6th grader)¹²

I would just change the fact that there would be more Black or minority teachers teaching honors classes. (Between ages 13-15)¹¹

I had a teacher who always used to touch my hair until I was finally like, "Excuse me... Uh, this is not a petting zoo." (8th grader)¹³

Black adolescent girls feel both marginalized and hypervisible when school adults misuse policies in the following ways

- willfully disregarding the pleas of Black adolescent girls and the predicaments they face, especially sexual harassment
- disciplining before fully investigating the situation
- over-implementing disciplinary policies for Black girls



I told the Vice Principal he was bothering me [with sexual harassment], and she just laughed it off. I tried to tell her I was for real, and she told me I should just ignore him, and he would stop. (7th grader)¹⁶

7th grader: When we're in groups of 2 or 3 or don't let it be 6 of us ... we get in trouble. They say we're too loud, but it's just the sight of us. 8th grader: Racism has so much to do with how things go down ... consequences at school are different if you're Black ... You can always witness White kids breaking the rules ... it's ignored.¹⁷

Image courtesy of Vecteezy.com

Black adolescent girls feel less cared for in school when school adults are hostile, weaponize their authority, or fail to share educational opportunities

There is just so much we are not exposed to... My friend almost missed the deadline for dual enrollment, because the counselor waited until the last minute to give her the information. No one talks to us about scholarships like they do with IB students [who are predominantly White]. (11th grader)¹⁵



Racism, oh yeah . . . They're supposed to be your teachers . . . But, if you don't like this person, why would you help them or pass them? . . . [Teachers be] just like, "Ok, you gonna mess with me? I'm gonna mess with you." Something like that. I think a lot of teachers do that because they can, and they get away with a lot. (12th grader)¹⁴

Image courtesy of Vecteezy.com

WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW? OUR SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSⁱⁱⁱ

Use school-level data to shed light on disproportionality by:

- collecting discipline data on common issues of disproportionality: violation type, disciplinary sanction, suspension length, instructional time lost, and number of suspensions by student
- disaggregating school-level disciplinary data based on both gender and race (not just gender or race) along with additional identities like ability, ELL status, etc. (Example: Oakland, CA [suspension data](#))
- making discipline data publicly available, posting discipline policies on your website in different languages, and ensuring policies are understood by families, staff, and students

Center Black girls' voices as you generate strategies to address oppression and create nurturing spaces by:

- soliciting the insights of Black girls, their families, and community leaders on school policies related to issues such as curriculum, conduct, dress, attendance, and other bias-based and sexual harassment procedures
- creating affinity groups for Black girls to gain support, share experiences, and advocate for changes in policy and practice
- using the [Bill of Rights to Support the Mental Health of Girls and Gender-Expansive Youth of Color in Schools](#) as a guide for investing in school-based mental health services
- supporting Black women who are teachers, creating culturally affirming environments for such teachers, and encouraging Black girls to become teachers
- reading [Cultivating Joyful Learning Spaces for Black Girls: Insights Into Interrupting School Pushout](#) in order to brainstorm ways to promote joyful spaces, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and culturally relevant curriculum

Conduct self-audits and make thoughtful changes to policies by:

- assessing whether rules and policies are disproportionately affecting Black girls
- creating an equity team of educators focused on reducing discipline disproportionality by reviewing school policies and observing teachers' classroom management practices
- using [Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools](#) to reflect on dress code policies
- engaging in continuous improvement by consulting resources for supporting equity including
 - [Initiative on Gender Justice & Opportunity](#)
 - [And They Cared: How to Create Better, Safer Learning Environments for Girls of Color](#)
 - [Building Equitable Learning Environments Network Resource Library](#)
 - [National Equity Project's Equity Tools](#)
 - [WestEd's Getting Better at Getting More Equitable](#)
- replacing suspensions with supportive, developmentally appropriate alternatives (for example, restorative justice, positive behavior interventions and supports or PBIS)

Support adults with shifts in approaches to be a more welcoming environment for Black girls by

- launching conversations with staff by engaging with resources like [Failure to Focus on the Discipline of Black Girls: Encouraging School Leaders to Initiate Conversations](#)
- training all school adults on equitable disciplinary practices and what can undermine such practices (e.g., microaggressions) and support such practices (e.g., trauma informed communication)
- ensuring school adults feel supported and buy into changes in discipline structures by providing specific strategies, trainings, and resources; and checking in periodically to learn what they need

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[Click here](#) or scan the QR code for references to papers in endnotes, more resources for educational leaders, and information on the larger project, which draws girls' quotes from prior research in the numbered citations.



[Click here](#) or scan the QR code to read part 1 of this brief.



ⁱThese facts come from numerous sources. See endnotes: 1-10. ⁱⁱThis section is based on findings from a [project](#) bringing together 286 quotes from Black middle and high school girls extracted from 50 studies published between 1994-March 2021. ⁱⁱⁱWe generated these by consulting academic literature, resource guides, books, and reports for proposed recommendations or implications for educational leaders or policymakers. See endnotes: 1-4; 7; 18-25.