Are U.S. Schools Obsolete?:
Examining an Anti-Black Carceral System of Schooling

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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ABSTRACT

When studying the link between U.S. prisons and schools, educational research widely relies on the school-to-prison pipeline (STTP) to understand how students are funneled from the schoolhouse to the jailhouse. However, this track critiques the STTP framework for its limitations in understanding how schools operate like prisons for Black students. Further, this track applies a prison abolitionist perspective to analyze the function of schooling for Black students and suggests that Black educational justice and liberation exist outside of the modern-day schoolhouse. Thus, this track begins by specifying the connections between U.S. schools and prison abolition. It goes on to explicate the shortcomings of the STTP and clarifies the carceral logic that underlies school policies and procedures. Next, it describes the prison–industrial complex and its accompanying political vision, prison–industrial complex abolition, as a useful model for both understanding how schools exacerbate social inequities for Black students and in working toward Black educational justice and liberation. The track concludes by inviting educators and critical researchers to grapple with questions that move toward liberatory Black education outside of the formal structures of schooling.

"The challenge of the twenty-first century is not to demand equal opportunity to participate in the machinery of oppression. Rather, it is to identify and dismantle those structures in which racism continues to be embedded."

(Davis, 2005)

Nearly 20 years after Davis asked the world, "Are prisons obsolete?" I return to her provocative question to ask educators of the United States, "Are U.S. schools obsolete?" Alongside contemporary critical educational scholars, I question whether U.S. schools are obsolete, particularly as anti-Black institutions. Much like Davis and Black education scholars, my question is rhetorical and grounded in abolitionist thinking. Also like Davis, I look to the sociocultural context of U.S. schools to first understand the function of schools in the United States and later to conclude the obsolescence of U.S. schools. However, in this track, I update Davis's question and specifically name the sociocultural context of U.S. schools, what bell hooks (2005) calls a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Furthermore, I situate Davis's abolitionist thinking within the field of education to encourage critical scholars, educators, and researchers to consider the oppressive effects of U.S. schooling for historically criminalized Black communities. In short, I dare to ask U.S. educators, "What is the function of schooling in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy?" and underscore the carceral logic that permeates U.S. schools in Black communities.

The Links Between Prison Abolition and U.S. Schools

The link between prison abolition and schools is not a novel concept. In "Abolitionist Alternatives," the final chapter of Are Prisons Obsolete?, Davis brings forth the connection between prison abolition and schools as she discusses alternatives to incarceration, which include the "demilitarization of schools [and] revitalization of education at all levels" (p.108). Davis's demarcation between schools and education underscores the critical difference between schooling as a social institution and "education as a practice of freedom" (Freire, 2000, p. 88). Since Davis's early link between prison abolition and schools, education research has extended her analysis (Meiners, 2007; Stovall, 2018, Shange, 2019). In fact, Stovall (2018) conceptualizes U.S. schools as "an US institution [that] primarily rewards students for order and compliance, which should also be considered part and parcel of the larger projects of settler colonialism and white supremacy/racism" (p. 51). This definition underscores schools as being driven by the "order and compliance" of social codes, an echo of social calls for "law and order" repeated by Democratic and Republican presidents and branded as the name of a popular TV drama series intended

to portray a just criminal legal system. Importantly, the similar calls for "order and compliance" and "law and order" emphasize the punitive framework shaping social and legal codes and brings attention to the "settler colonialism and white supremacy/racism" ideologies inherent in schools and society. Moreover, this conceptualization of schools supports the call for school abolition, as Stovall distinguishes between the structure and system of U.S. schools and the practice and action of learning that is education, a noted departure from the framework commonly known as the school-to-prison pipeline (STTP). While the STTP framework "describes how harsh school discipline policies and law enforcement policies intersect to feed young people into the prison system" (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2012, p. 595), the STTP framework does not fully account for the carceral logic of U.S. schools, which create the conditions that transform Black school communities into prisons populations and work as a disservice to Black students. This framing of the STTP serves as a barrier to remedying educational injustices for Black students for three crucial reasons. First, the STTP is an ahistorical model that marks the 1990s as the start of harsh discipline and law enforcement practices in Black public schools. Second, the STTP offers an incomplete analysis of the link between U.S. public schools and prisons, choosing only to focus on the effects of discipline practices and policies without consideration for the ideology driving these practices and policies. Finally, the STTP ignores the entanglement of schools in the prison–industrial complex (PIC) in favor of a logic that positions public schools to disproportionately and deliberately push Black students toward the prison system. However, a critical understanding of U.S. schools situates them within the confines of the PIC.

The STTP as an Ahistorical Framework

Sojoyner (2013) criticizes the STTP for its "simplified logic [which argues that] a confluence of police officers and criminal justice personnel…place overwhelming Black and Brown students into the clutches of the prison system" (p. 252). Yet, as Sojoyner clarifies, Black students are not simply transferred from schools to prison by police officers via disciplinary policies. For instance, Sojoyner points to Los Angeles's response to the 1965 Watts Rebellion within Los Angeles County Public School and writes, "LAPD officers were brought in to teach classes in Black high schools in Los Angeles under the program entitled Police Role in Government (1974)" (p. 252). This case study in Black high schools exemplifies that such "a confluence of police officers and criminal justice personnel" began decades before the zero-tolerance policies of the 1990s. In fact, the origins of school policing dates to 1948 when the LAPD formed "a security unit designed to patrol schools in increasingly integrated neighborhoods" (ACLU, 2017, p. 3). Specifically, the LAPD established this patrolling force after white residents enacted violence and vandalized newly integrated neighborhoods and schools. Rather than locate the violence among white residents, the LAPD located the issue within Black communities and employed police officers to monitor the behavior and movement of Black students during a period of increasing Black migration to the U.S. West and North. This anti-Black logic that spurred the deployment of the LAPD in schools during the 1940s similarly led to the formal development of the first School Resource Officer (SRO) program in Flint, Michigan in the late 1950s with the stated goals of deploying police officers to serve as "teachers and law-related counselors" (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 1995). As such, a simplified connection between zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and the birth of the STTP fails to consider the history of the U.S. government's relationship to Black public education. The critical history of police officers acting as teachers, patrolling forces, and counselors within Black public schools illustrates how police officers act as one of the powerful players within the PIC. Moreover, these interactions between police officers and Black students are rooted in anti-Blackness, a concept that describes the systemic dehumanization of Black people (Dumas & ross, 2016). In Black school communities, both historically and contemporarily, police officers serve their role of disciplining and educating Black students under the banner of anti-Blackness. In discussing the contemporary relations between police officers and Black students Black Rights Matter activist Gregory McKelvey explains,

> For me and all my friends it felt like police were in schools to make sure that white kids were safe from Black kids, which has a huge impact on your idea of self-worth as a child. It's this idea that you are instantly a liability or a threat when you know you have done nothing wrong (McKelvey, as cited in Schenwar & Law, 2020, p. 178).

McKelvey's firsthand account of police presence within schools demonstrates the anti-Black attitudes of police officers within Black school communities. He first points to police officers' role in protecting white students, a role that continues from the LAPD's 1940s patrolling force in public schools. Then, McKelvey describes the damaging mental effects (i.e., "which has a huge impact on your idea of self-worth") of this police presence within his school

as experienced by him and his peers, and thus highlights one of the impacts of anti-Blackness on Black students. Importantly, McKelvey's account emphasizes police officers' assumptions of Black students as dangerous and perpetually criminal within their public schools. Paired with the power to arrest and discipline students, these anti-Black attitudes and assumptions implicate police officers in the PIC. Still, police officers are not the only powerful players caught in the "set of symbiotic relationships" that make up the PIC (Davis, 2003, p.107). Teachers also play a role in disciplining and punishing students in ways that overlap at the intersection of antiblackness and misogyny, a concept Moya Bailey describes as misogynoir. As Bailey (2021) clarifies,

> Misogynoir is not simply the racism that Black women encounter, nor is it the misogyny Black women negotiate. Misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization. The term is a portmanteau of "misogyny," the hatred of women, and "noir," the French word for "black," which also carries a specific meaning in film and other media. (p. 1)

For instance, MG, a Black high school student, details how Black schoolgirls face misogynoir at schools by their teachers. MG points out that "Black young women are just more closely watched. Let's say someone gets attacked—they believe it's the young woman's fault because of what she's wearing" (MG, as cited in, Schenwar & Law, 2020, pp. 181–182). MG's experience mirrors those of many other Black girls, "who are often singled out in uniquely gendered ways, for not conforming to dress code or gender expectations" (Schenwar & Law, 2020, p. 181). Further, MG's experience demonstrates the attitudes rooted in misogynoir that teachers adopt in disciplining Black girls. The experiences of MG and other Black girls like her show that it is not solely police officers who police Black students. However, this fuller understanding of the carceral logic that infects Black school communities is possible only after critiquing the STTP rhetoric for its "simplified logic" and working toward an understanding of U.S. schools which a) recognizes its context within a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society and b) is grounded in abolitionist thinking.

The STTP Offers an Incomplete Analysis

Further, while the STTP recognizes the discriminatory outcomes, harsh disciplinary actions, and pushout phenomenon (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022; Berlowitz et al., 2017) that permeate Black school communities, the STTP framework fails to fully account for either the carceral logic that drives policy in Black public schools or the creation of "structures of violence" (Davis, 2003, p. 108), both of which enmesh Black public schools within the U.S. prison system. In fact, the STTP seldom names the aforementioned features it does recognize as violent acts, even though the World Health Organization (2022) defines violence as "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation." Black public schools staffed with, referred to, and disciplined by law enforcement officials represent forms of violence that weaponize physical force and power against Black students, which falls squarely within the parameters outlined by WHO. In fact, critical educational research moves beyond the language of "high likelihood" to describe the violence Black students endure in U.S. schools. Instead, critical Black scholars have articulated the specificity of anti-Blackness underlying K–12 schooling, identifying U.S schooling as "a project that is inherently anti-Black" (Givens, 2020, p. 23), "structured by anti-[B]lack solidarity" (Wilderson, 2010, p. 58), the "cause [of] Black suffering, melancholy, and indignities" (ross, 2020, p.50), and uninhabitable for Black students, teachers, and those working toward Black liberation (Marie & Watson, 2020). Put differently, U.S. schools are violent due in part to their anti-Blackness. To understand and ultimately disrupt these "structures of violence" that work as a disservice to Black students, one must understand the ideology used to create these structures. Currently, the STTP does not offer that possibility. Instead, the STTP embodies a reformist approach to educational inequities and injustices within Black public education, as it advocates for policy changes within violent educational structures without naming, challenging, or dismantling the anti-Black carceral ideology supporting these "structures of violence." In short, the STTP framework cannot adequately prevent violence inflicted on Black public school students because the framework does not fully analyze the carceral logic, and its disparate impact on Black students, driving public school policy.

The STTP Ignores the Entanglement of Schools in the PIC

Finally, as Meiners (2007) writes, "linkages between schools and prisons are less a pipeline, more a persistent nexus or a web of intertwined, punitive threads," (pp. 31–32) which she posits "is more accurate as it captures the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of the intersections of education and incarceration" (p. 32). Within Meiners's naming of a school–prison nexus, she avoids the ahistorical and incomplete analysis characteristic of the STTP. Instead, Meiners identifies the "intersections of education and incarceration" and moves toward recognizing a common ideology that guides education and prison policy (p. 32). In the same vein as this critique of the STTP, it is notable that rather than being constructed as a pipeline to U.S. prisons, Black public schools are entangled in the PIC in myriad ways. Black public schools are entangled in the intricate web of the PIC as law enforcement in the form of school resource officers and local police officers roam the hallways of Black public schools, as juvenile courts dole out punishments for student behavior at school that lead to juvenile detention centers, and as schools push out Black students due to school officials' perceptions of their attitudes and behavior (e.g., Justice Policy Institute, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014; Morris, 2016). This persistence of anti-Black school policy permeates both progressive and conservative state contexts. For instance, Robeson High School, an outwardly progressive public school in San Francisco that explicitly promotes messages of social justice and racial equality, "had the most disproportionate suspensions of Black students in the city out of all nineteen public high schools serving students in the 2012–13 school year" (Shange, 2019, pp. 84–85). Thus, this carceral logic underlies widespread, nationwide school policies, and powerful players such as police officers and school authorities who surveil, police, and imprison Black students vis-a-vis disciplinary practices, outcomes, and attitudes dangerously ensnare Black public schools in the PIC.

PIC Abolition: A Vision for U.S. Schools

The PIC is a less mainstream, less understood, and, in many ways, "less 'sexy'" framework than its more widely known STTP counterpart (Meiners, 2007, p. 32). Still, critical educational research relies on the PIC framework to understand the linkages between U.S. schools and prisons (Meiners, 2007; Stovall, 2018). As Meiners (2007) notes, the PIC is a term widely used by activists and researchers to describe the "connections between jails and the economy" (p. 2). Specifically, the prison abolitionist organization, Critical Resistance (2022), defines the PIC as "the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems." Though not explicitly named within this definition of the PIC, schools act as an arm of the PIC as government officials enact school policies that use surveillance through school resource officers, policing through teachers and school officials, and imprisonment through suspensions and expulsions as solutions to social problems of both real and perceived student misbehavior. Notably, much like the disproportionate impacts of the PIC within larger U.S. society on Black Americans, Black students also endure the disproportionate impacts of the PIC within U.S. schools (ACLU, 2017; ACLU, 2023).

If the PIC represents a "less 'sexy' framework" than the STTP, then so too does PIC abolition within U.S. hegemony. Critical Resistance (2022) defines this framework as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment." As a counter-hegemonic praxis, PIC abolition locates solutions that extend beyond and outside of the PIC and targets various institutions, including schools, that utilize imprisonment, policing, and surveillance. Furthermore, PIC abolition seeks to abolish harmful punitive practices such as school suspensions, in which "Black students face suspensions at rates two times that of white students," (ACLU, 2023, p. 25) and school arrests, in which "Black boys with disabilities faced highest overall arrest rates." (ACLU, 2017, p. 30). Evidently, these disciplinary practices that follow the logics of the PIC disproportionately impact Black students. Thus, PIC abolition simultaneously demonstrates the current disservice U.S. schools inflict on Black children and offers a liberatory vision for Black education. First, PIC abolition rejects the reductive nature of the STTP. Second, PIC abolition allows for the construction of alternatives to punitive disciplinary practices in Black public schools. Finally, PIC abolition relies on a praxis that strives for just educational outcomes for Black students.

PIC Abolition Rejects the "Simplified Logic" of STTP

As previously argued, the STTP provides an insufficient framework for understanding and analyzing the ideology that drives punitive disciplinary policies and procedures in Black public schools due to the ahistorical

nature of the STTP framework, its incomplete analysis of the carceral logic motivating public policy, and the more accurate naming of the Black public schools within the PIC. However, the PIC abolition framework actively rejects this "simplified logic" as the political vision disrupts notions of imprisonment, policing, and surveillance—three key features guiding disciplinary practices within Black public schools. In fact, within their definition of PIC abolition, Critical Resistance (2022) outlines its first goal as the elimination of these features. Within the context of Black schools, this goal would be multifaceted. For instance, the elimination of imprisonment would require the removal of disciplinary practices such as in-school suspensions. Similarly, the elimination of policing and surveillance would necessitate both the end of the hypervigilant control of Black students by school officials, which is predicated on misogynistic and anti-Black notions of appropriate behavior, and the physical removal of police officers who monitor Black students within their schools. Overall, PIC abolition lives up to its name. When applied to Black public schools, PIC abolition seeks to abolish damaging practices promoted and enforced by the PIC. Thus, this political vision proves liberatory for Black students currently harmed by the PIC and its resulting ideology.

PIC Abolition Allows for the Construction of Alternatives

While PIC abolition does work to abolish imprisonment, policing, and surveillance, the political vision also works to create transformative and liberating alternatives. As Critical Resistance (2022) outlines in the second half of their definition of PIC abolition, the political vision also includes "creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment." Mariame Kaba points to the words of fellow abolitionist Ruth Gilmore and reminds readers that "abolition is about making things as much as it is about dismantling" (Madden et al., 2020). This additional goal of PIC abolition allows for the construction of alternatives to disciplinary practices and procedures like in-school suspensions and police presence within Black public schools. For example, Black public schools could implement restorative peace circles to model conflict resolution and accountability among students, teachers, and other school personnel. Furthermore, the construction of alternatives to punishment and imprisonment allows Black students to use "education as a practice as freedom" as the larger school community works toward creating school practices and procedures that embody notions of justice and freedom for Black students (hooks, 1994; Freire, 2000). Ultimately, the praxis central to PIC abolition allows for alternative practices that free Black students from the harmful punitive policies in their public schools.

PIC Abolition Centers Praxis

Another major strength of PIC abolition is its use of praxis, described by Freire (2000) as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126). PIC abolition models this dual act of reflection and action within Black public schools, as it works to both envision the end of punitive school policies and procedures and create alternative, non-punitive solutions to social problems. Thus, PIC abolition within schools directs its praxis toward dismantling the PIC through practices and guiding theories that do not rely on imprisoning, policing, or punishing students. However, PIC abolition moves beyond Freire's directive at transformation and instead, as the name suggests, emphasizes abolition of the PIC and its accompanying ideology across multiple segments of society. Still, within Black public schools, this praxis requires the participation of different members of the school community. Not only should justice-oriented educators and school officials embrace a political vision that constructs a pathway toward liberation for Black students, but they should also heed hooks's (1994) advice in "teaching to transgress" and empower Black students to adopt PIC abolition as a praxis for students' educational justice. Current data shows that Black students are suspended at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group and that Black students have lower levels of educational attainment than white students; both of these findings point to current educational inequities for Black students (de Brey et al., 2019). Whereas the STTP may point to the suspension rates among Black students as a central problem disproportionately leading Black students to jails and prisons without problematizing imprisonment, PIC abolition extends this analysis and necessarily problematizes the use of imprisonment, policing, and punishment as damaging components of the PIC. Therefore, PIC abolition does not solely view research findings linking Black student suspension rates and educational attainment as educational inequities. PIC abolition views these research findings as educational injustices and actively seeks to undo them.

The use of praxis embedded within PIC abolition further seeks to break these links between punitive disciplinary policies and the pushout of Black students from secondary and postsecondary education. Ultimately, the overarching goal of PIC abolition as it pertains to Black public schools pursues just educational outcomes for Black students by providing them a mechanism toward liberation.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Yes. U.S. schools are obsolete. Davis's 2003 analysis of the PIC and contemporary critiques of the STTP framework, as well as critical educational research reveal that U.S. schools enact carceral logic to discipline and punish Black school communities in ways that do an immense disservice to Black students. Importantly, the firsthand testimonies of Black students like McKelvey and MG demonstrate the misogynistic and anti-Black attitudes of police officers, teachers, and authority figures within their Black school communities. Overall, these glimpses into Black school communities and a thorough understanding of the PIC reveal there is no pipeline, nor does there need to be; U.S. schools already operate as prisons for Black students.

However, the future of U.S. schools does not end with this question and answer. Instead, my hope for future educators is that "U.S. schools are obsolete" can serve as a starting point for asking (and answering) more critical questions to offer Black students a liberatory rather than oppressive education. Educators who accept this premise—U.S. schools are obsolete because they exacerbate social inequities—must, like me, grapple with questions such as: What institutions can take the place of schools to educate Black students? Are institutions necessary to educate Black students? What does a liberatory education for Black students look like in the context of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy?

There are many future directions for research on how U.S. schools employ carceral logic in Black school communities. Likewise, there are many possible avenues for disrupting these harmful practices. Rather than offer a prescriptive list of solutions, I align with Mariame Kaba's (2021) call to experiment with a variety of potential solutions that address harm in ways that do not involve imprisonment, policing, and surveillance. One possibility to begin to dismantle the harmful institution of U.S. schooling for Black students would be to eliminate policing, not just police officers, from schools. This experiment recognizes how Black students are disciplined and punished by police officers, teachers, and school officials and starts to tear down the hostile white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal hegemony that undergirds U.S. schools. Nonetheless, I must emphasize that this experiment will not completely destroy the conditions that make schools sites of incarceration for Black students. Nor will this experiment simply be given to Black communities by the grace of the State. Rather, this singular experiment must coexist alongside multiple PIC abolitionist interventions and be demanded by Black activists and their co-conspirators, so it can then be transformed into a policy demand. This must then also evolve and continue on the path to the abolition of U.S. schools in their current state, to provide Black students with the liberatory education that is their right.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on Contributor

Re'Nyqua Farrington (she/her), is a Ph.D. student in Education, Society, and Culture at the University of California, Riverside. Her experiences attending and student teaching at predominately Black public schools largely shape her current research interests. Re'Nyqua's research interests broadly focus on investigating and disrupting the intersections between public schools, prisons, and anti-Blackness in the U.S. Specifically, her dissertation studies the history of Black student resistance to school police. Re'Nyqua received her B.S. in English Education from Nova Southeastern University and later completed her M.Ed. in Diversity and Equity from the University of California, Riverside. Currently, she serves as a program assistant for the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC) and as a member of the Graduate Council for the Critical Race Studies in Education Association (CRSEA).

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