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"They're Always Actin Up": Exploring the Impacts of In-school Disciplinary Policies In Out-of-school Spaces.

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“They’re Always Actin Up”: Exploring the Impacts of In-school Disciplinary Policies In Out-of-school Spaces.

Nakisha D. Whittington

ABSTRACT

In an effort to shed light on the experiences of Black girls in an after-school program, this study captures how their peer and teacher relationships were impacted by in-school suspension(s). Over the course of eight weeks, an ethnographic case study was conducted with two kindergarten Black girls who attended a predominately white after-school program. Using critical race theory and critical race feminism, this study adds to existing literature that reveals the harmful nature of in-school disciplinary practices on Black and Brown students in general, and Black girls in particular. The results of this study reveal how in-school punishment spills over into out-of-school spaces creating another site of Black punishment for Black girls. Informal learning spaces, such as aftercare programs, must consider the barriers associated with in-school suspensions and work with teachers and staff to offer a space that will honor students’ differences and allow children who are culturally misrepresented to have an informal learning experience where there is more grace given by teachers and caregivers, instead of disciplinary practices rooted in anti-blackness. What message are we sending to culturally diverse learners if we continue to punish and criminalize their behavior that is deemed to be problematic, as early as kindergarten?

Adultification is a form of dehumanization, robbing Black children in the United States of the thing that is assumed to make childhood distinct from all other developmental periods: innocence. Children are seen as innocent because they have limited life experiences that are often used to navigate life’s intricate situations. This innocence can also be connected to children’s natural curiosity. While the concept of innocence may be seen as problematic for all children, Black children do not get to benefit from this notion in the way other groups of children do. Beginning as young as age five, both Black boys (Goff et al, 2014) and Black girls (Epstein et al, 2017) are viewed as more adult and less innocent than their white peers. Adultification contributes to a false narrative that Black youths’ transgressions are intentional and malicious instead of the result of a child’s decision-making—a key characteristic of childhood. Childhood, in other words, is raced as not-Black. Black girls in early childhood classrooms are more likely to be suspended or harshly disciplined than their peer counterparts yet continue to be understudied (Annamma et al., 2016). It is important to understand the impact of in-school suspension in out-of-school spaces research shows that suspension in childhood is connected to greater increases in arrests during adulthood (Novak, 2022). To date, there is a dearth in the literature addressing how in-school disciplinary policies shape Black girls’ experiences in an informal learning context like after-school programs. In this track, I use a critical theoretical lens to explore the impacts of in-school disciplinary policies on two Black girls in an out-of-school space. I show how both peers and teachers in the after-school program treated the girls differently after they were suspended from school.

Background to the Problem

Black girls’ suspension rates continue to rise at faster rates than those of their counterparts (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Black girls in elementary school are being disciplined through “push-out” strategies and visual accounts of these disciplinary tactics are becoming the headline news. For example, in 2012 the arrest of 6-year-old Salecia Johnson, a Black kindergartner in Georgia, was handcuffed and taken away in a police car because it was reported she damaged school property. Seven years prior, in 2005, 5-year-old J’aiesha Scott was handcuffed in the principal’s office by police officers after having a tantrum. Again in 2006, 6-year-old Takovia Allen was taken out of school in a police car after kicking a teacher’s aide in the ankle (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017). This recurrence of Black girls being harshly disciplined in early childhood classrooms has placed significance and gave visibility to movements such as the #BlackGirlsMatter movement. Unfortunately, there seems to be a growing number of cases in which young Black girls are penalized “under exclusionary school disciplinary practices and constructed as malice perpetrators who intellectually and physically trespass in the classroom” (Hines-Datiri & Andrews, 2017, p.

2). This negative portrait of Black girls in school carries over into informal learning environments, such as after-school programs. Surrounding children in an environment that displays negative messages about Black girls' behavior in early childhood settings can be detrimental to their identity formation. This highlights the importance of how in-school policies, like out-of-school suspensions, impact the informal schooling experiences of young children.

Zero Tolerance Policy

Zero-tolerance policies are a form of school discipline that results in the removal of students from the classroom, or the school for a length of time set by administrators. Under these policies, students can be removed from the classroom for reasons decided by administrators. For example, some school code violations may include talking back, cell phone use, hitting or physical touch. The issue with implementing a zero-tolerance policy in school is that it does not take into account that Black students are already culturally policed in schools. In particular, the U.S. school system functions under norms that are oftentimes aligned with white, middle-class values (Annamma, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Evans and Lester (2012) suggest that the behavior of children of color is viewed through a lens of "criminology," meaning teachers have preconceived notions in place that prematurely shape the types of punishment Black students will receive. Consequently, teachers focus on policing their bodies/movements and keeping them out of trouble, rather than helping to support them in academics. When we factor in zero-tolerance policies, they only add to these stereotypes by implementing exclusionary practices, such as out-of-school suspension. This perception that our school administrators have about Black students' behavior will only add to the existing disparity in discipline outcomes.

Problem Statement and Purpose

Although there is a growing body of literature examining the impacts of extreme school disciplinary policy uses in urban schools, there is little qualitative research examining how policies impact Black girls in white suburban after-school spaces. The following questions guided my inquiry for this study.

Research Questions

1. How do in-school disciplinary policies shape the peer-to-peer interactions of Black girls in an afterschool program?
2. In what ways do predominately white informal learning spaces perpetuate in school punishment of Black girls?

This qualitative case study draws on critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism (CRF). CRT grew out of the legal field but is widely used in education research as a lens to deconstruct racism in educational settings (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has five tenets for centering race in an analysis. The five tenets are as follows:

1. Counter-storytelling. Counter-stories facilitate social, political, and cultural cohesion, as well as survival and resistance among marginalized groups. By acknowledging systemic oppression, we recognize there is more than one way to view the world, which can open up possibilities for understanding lived experiences in new and different ways (Lopez 2001).
2. The permanence of racism. This tenet asserts that racism controls the political, social, and economic realms of American society, where, from a CRT perspective, racism is regarded as an inherent part of society, privileging the dominant group over others.
3. Whiteness as property. This tenet roots from the embedded racism in American society, where the notion of whiteness operates on different levels, such as the right of possession, the right to disposition, and the right of exclusion (DeCuir & Dixon; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998).
4. Interest conversion. This tenet acknowledges white people as being the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1998; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004) which is exemplified in affirmative action and diversity initiatives, and

5. Critique of liberalism. This tenet comes from the notion of color blindness, the neutrality of the law and equal opportunity for all. According to this tenet, colorblindness is a mechanism that allows people to ignore racist policies that perpetuate social inequity, which can be found in the lack of inclusivity in the academic curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

As it relates to this study, a CRT lens is most useful as it features classed, raced, and gendered children as well as my classed, raced, and gendered self. As previously mentioned, one premise of CRT is that “racism is normal and aberrant in U.S. society, [and] storytelling is important with regard to exploring race and racism in our society; liberalism should be critiqued; and there is an emphasis on realism with regard to racism” (Ladson-Billings, 2009, 88). From my viewpoint, the after-school experiences of the Black girls highlight concerns of marginalized students, as well as members of the dominant society (Ladson-Billings 1999). Further, CRT allowed me to deconstruct and shed light on the inequitable school treatment of Black girls in a racist society.

While CRF stems from CRT, the difference lies in CRF’s acknowledgment of the multidimensional construct of Black womanhood (Berry, 2010; Wing, 1997). CRF has been used to analyze the discipline practices among Black girls in school (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017). CRF is organized by four central tenets: intersectionality, anti-essentialism, multidisciplinary and praxis.

Using a Black feminist lens allowed me to be self-reflexive through personal narratives and storytelling, while also allowing me to recognize the value in the knowledge that I already possess (Patterson et.al, 2016). Through these notions of storytelling and reflexivity, Black researchers can construct new racialized understandings and knowledge (Love 2004; Gillborn 2008). CRT and CRF are useful critical lenses, as both frameworks acknowledge the complexity of Black girls’ lived experiences, recognizing that race, class, and gender are “socially constructed divisions and markers of power that may enter into the structuring of group life” (Scott, 2002, p. 401).

Methodology

Drawing on Patti Lather’s (1991) outline of qualitative research, qualitative researchers conduct studies to do one of three things 1) understand 2) interrogate or 3) deconstruct. I chose to use an ethnographically informed case study design to understand the lived schooling experiences of two Black girls because of its affordances in examining how school discipline impacts the lived literacies of young children, who were often marginalized by traditional pedagogies, but also by traditional methodologies. In conducting an ethnographic case study, my aim was to answer “how” questions from the perspective of the participants. Merriam (1988) defines a case as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27), and this could apply to a person, a program, a group, a specific policy, and so on. Employing this definition of a case allowed me to create boundaries around the types of participants I wanted to capture in my research.

The purpose of a case study was “not to find the ‘correct interpretation of the facts, but rather to eliminate erroneous conclusions so that one is left with the best possible, the most compelling, interpretation” (Bromley, 1986, p. 38) With this in mind, I sought to provide interpretation of my participants peer to peer interactions through different types of data that gave a clear depiction of their experiences in the after-school program. Merriam (1988) listed three characteristics that defined a case study, two of which I believe applied to my study. Merriam explained that case study research can be descriptive as it yields rich, thick descriptions of a phenomenon. She also explained that case study research was heuristic in that it illuminated our understanding of a particular phenomenon. It was clear to situate my study as having these characteristics because on the one hand, I provided a detailed account of my participants’ interactions, and on the other hand my study was heuristic in nature as it delineated a sense of understanding around how others interpreted Black girls’ behavior in the after-school space. In sum, employing a case study methodology enabled me to explore my question(s) as the research developed as well as aggregate different types of data to help me paint a broad picture of the research as a whole.

Methods

Traditional ethnographic methods were used for this study, which included informal interviews, observations, and fieldnotes. A substantial amount of data described in this paper is drawn from fieldnotes from extensive observations of interactions among two Black girls in a predominately white after-school program. Situated in the northeast region of the U.S., this after-school program served as the main site for this study.

According to the site records where the after-school program took place, 88% of children were white, 3% were Black, 5% were Asian, 3% were Hispanic, and 1% were identified as Other. Staff and teachers were 97% white, with only 3% Black and/or Hispanic staff. The after-school site was located in a predominately upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood, and a majority of the students came from upper-middle and working-class families. The after-school class itself consisted of 20 white students, 3 Black students, 2 Indian students, 1 Hispanic student, and 1 Asian student. Out of the four after-school teachers, three were white and one was Black.

Over the course of eight weeks, I observed two Black girls in their interactions with their peers and teachers in the after-school program. From February to April, I went into the program two days a week and observed the girls for an hour. My observations did not follow any particular pattern. Rather, my intention was to capture sporadic moments so that I could see the girls' interactions with a range of peers and teachers. I also had the opportunity to observe after the program during my tutoring sessions with the girls. Our tutoring sessions were on Wednesdays and Thursdays from 6–7 pm at the local university library. Tutoring allowed me to have one-on-one conversations with the girls without interviewing them formally. One limitation of my role in this study as a researcher was that I also worked as one of the after-school teachers two days a week. Therefore, it was a challenge for me to sustain a "least adult role" (Mandell, 2003). In fact, all of my participant observations took place during their play time in which they initiated my engagement to play. Each time play was initiated, I always let them lead and direct the play (Corsaro, 2003). In this track, my data analysis showcases my reflexive methodological reporting of how I as the researcher and after-school teacher may have affected the observations, data collection process, and the lively participation in the after-school space. I am a literacy scholar whose research is situated within early childhood and elementary education. My work examines and interrogates the disparities around digital literacy practices in urban education. Methodologically, my training is in qualitative research mostly ethnographic in style and case study design. Because of my research agenda, specifically, examining disparities among underserved youth, I am constantly concerned with the representation of participant's experiences and narratives. In fact, this track is an example of how I showcase participants' narratives by capturing conversations and field interviews to center their lived experiences. As both a Black woman and a Black scholar, I am aware of my position as a researcher in the observation of two Black girls who have been marginalized by and within white spaces. I am also mindful of the role that reflexivity plays in the research process. Having experienced marginalization as a Black girl and woman, I felt an obligation to ensure participants' voices were appropriately captured in this study. Their marginalized in-school and out-of-school experiences ignited a sense of familiarity that led to a special connection with the participants. As a Black woman scholar from the South, I am always thinking of how location impacts young children's schooling experiences. My vast educational background in K-12 spaces both urban and rural, and my ability to understand the contextual aspects of the participant's experiences enhances this research study. I recognize my privilege as a researcher, but as a Black woman who has experienced Black girlhood in K-12 schools, I can relate to participants' marginalized experiences. Therefore, I cannot detach my identity from the qualitative case study. This dual role allowed me to be more reflective throughout the research process.

On two occasions, I was able to collect data while the girls were in their formal school setting. Like the after-school program, their elementary school was located in a predominantly white neighborhood and the student body of their school was 82% white, 5% Black, 2% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 9% Biracial. All of the teachers were white. During my first observation in their school setting, I recorded classroom and lunchroom interactions directly into a small tablet as they occurred. Although, during one instance while I was observing a small group discussion I sensed that my note-taking was making the people in the room feel uncomfortable, in which case I decided to write down notes soon afterward (Emerson et al., 2011). As soon as the whole class transitioned to a bathroom break or lunchtime, I wrote down conversations with teachers and mapped out scenes of what I observed by time and student activity.

Data and Analyses

After only eight weeks of observations, the data reveal that some students in the after-school program did in fact treat the girls differently as a result of their in-school label of being "suspended." One principle theme, Teacher and Peer Behavior, was the focus of my analyses. The findings suggest that in-school disciplinary policies impacted students' experiences in the after-school program. The following fieldnotes show how student and adult behavior changed after they learned of an in-school suspension by one of the girls. The pseudonyms Raegan and Ryan have been used to describe the participants of the study.

Student perceptions: “*They’re always actin up*”

One of the routines for students in the afterschool program is to go straight to the playground when they get off the bus. Once they enter the playground they are to hang up their backpacks and then they are free to play. Most of the children attend different schools from their peers in the afterschool program so this is also a time when peers get to see each other for the first time that day. Today is a chilly day. (researcher fieldnotes)

As Raegan and Ryan enter the playground I notice that they are the only ones without book bags. They run smiling to greet their friends and play a friendly game of tag. Reagan is wearing her favorite black boots¹ with white stockings and a blue dress. Ryan is wearing blue jeans and a red shirt with black and red tennis shoes. (Researcher fieldnotes)

Researcher: Hey my love, where is your bookbag?
 Mike: (Interjects) They were suspended from school! They were not at school today!
 Researcher: Is that true? What happen?
 Raegan: (Nods head in agreement) Um, my sister was bad at school. So we did not go to school. Her was bad in the class. Um, can you hold this for me? I need to go potty.
 Researcher: (Grabs McDonald hamburger from Raegan) Sure, okay, let me walk you down.
 Researcher: Hey Ryan, come see. Were you out of school today? Were you suspended?
 Ryan: Hmm. Yes. I did not go to school today.
 Researcher: Really, why?
 Ryan: Umm, I was a little bad.
 Researcher: Really, what happen?
 Ryan: (Runs off to play)
 Mike: Ryan is always being bad at school and stuff.
 Researcher: Ok now Mike, go play. I did not ask you for details.

After Mike shouts out that Ryan was suspended, most of the kids on the playground begin to stare at Ryan. However, her friends on the playground didn’t seem to care about this announcement and continued to play with Ryan. However, I noticed that Ryan seemed to be bothered by Mike’s comment because she stuck out her tongue at him soon after he announced her suspension. (Researcher fieldnotes)

After playground time the after-school kids go inside to wash hands and get ready for a snack. During this time children are allowed to sit anywhere they want. It is during this time that I noticed most of the kids discussing happenings from the week or day. Sometimes a teacher will sit with kids and engage in conversation. Today I’m just observing. (Researcher fieldnotes)

The teacher asked Raegan and Ryan if they would like to sit next to each other during snack time. I scanned the room with the other teacher and noticed there was only one chair available at Mike’s table. He immediately grabbed another student’s belongings to make sure that girls are not sitting next to him. (Researcher fieldnotes)

Mike: Don’t come over here. My brother is sitting here. Go somewhere else.
 Ryan: No, me and my sister need to sit somewhere.
 Mike: So, you can’t sit here.
 Ryan: (*Pouts and whines*)
 Miss Jan: Come over here Ryan you and your sister can sit over here.
 Mike: Yea, we don’t want y’all over here. (*laughs*)
 Jack: Who Ryan and Raegan, no they’re always getting in trouble and stuff at school.
 Mike: I know they’re always acting up.

¹ In a one on one conversation with Raegan outside of after-school she told me that her favorite shoes were her black boots.

I'm annoyed that the teacher just stood there and watched. I am here observing today, so why is she depending on me to intervene and redirect. I make a note to speak with her after class. Thankfully, I don't think Ryan or Raegan heard when Jack called Ryan "bad". (Researcher fieldnotes)

Children's experiences in traditional school spaces and in out-of-school spaces serve as a powerful developmental factor, given that school is where much socialization and identity development occurs (Harter, 1999). The way some students in the after-school program treated the girls after their suspension was upsetting. During recess time on the playground, peer interactions with the girls began with what happened to them at school. Only the consequential behaviors were discussed openly on the playground. Rather than greet the girls with a formal hello some of their peers remind them that they are "bad". Further, the name-calling and exclusionary attitude during snack time relate to forms of stigmatization. Stigmatization may cause an individual to feel shame and worthlessness. Research shows that name-calling is a form of bullying. There are serious long-term effects associated with young children who are victimized by bullying. Such long-term effects include depression, poor self-esteem, and abusive relationships (Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2010). My worry is that the girls will believe and internalize the negative labels that they have been given to them by society and develop a need to protect themselves from experiences at school through disengaging.

Teacher Behavior: "you know how she gets when she can't have her way"

Later in the day Raegan is accused of hitting someone. Miss. Jan, the teacher, immediately tells Raegan to clip down. Students are given clips that allow them to move up or down on a chart that describes their behavior for the day. Green happy face means Excellent day. Yellow sad face means challenging day, and Red sad face means bad day. So clipping down at this time would mean that Raegan would be on yellow which reflects having a challenging day. Raegan has a tantrum and shouts it's not true. Although I am just observing today, I intervene, because quite frankly I've had enough of the malarkey and accusations placed on these two beautiful Black girls in this very white school setting. My conversation with Miss. Jan was short, but I think she will think twice before she asks the girls to clip down in my presence. (Researcher fieldnotes)

Researcher:	Jan, what happened?
Miss. Jan	One of the kids said Raegan hit them with a leggo
Researcher:	Did you see this? Did you talk to both of them?
Miss Jan:	Well, no, but you know how she gets when she can't have her way.
Researcher:	Oh, I mean really Jan, you didn't even bother to ask both children what happened. How will you show them how to share and resolve things if you don't know what happened? Be consistent with the behavior system, because if it were another student you would have taken the time to find out what happened. Just follow through like you would normally do.
Miss Jan:	I know. (<i>walks away</i>)

The teacher, who was newly graduated and a first-time after-school teacher, expressed to me that she wanted to be an early childhood teacher. So I always found myself sharing teaching tips and techniques with her throughout the day. Having said that, I was very strategic in pointing out the "behavior system" in the encounter described, because of course if I would have said, "Don't accuse the Black girl of hitting, the one who was suspended for having a tantrum and hitting, she would have denied that she was implicitly doing so. This encounter between the white after-school teacher and the Black researcher illuminates how implicit bias rooted in whiteness can go unchecked in spaces like after-school programs. This type of interaction provides some understanding as to why and when teachers and other after-school personnel engage in behaviors that reproduce racial inequality, often despite best intentions and commitments to racial equity (Warikoo et al., 2016). The next section recounts and evaluates a dialogue between the researcher and the director of the after-school program.

Administrator perceptions: “they had the tantrum in the open forum where other parents walked by and saw this happening”

Today the director stopped to ask me if I had any tips on how to handle Raegan and Ryan, because apparently when I was out they had a tantrum. (Researcher fieldnotes)

- Director: (Researcher) I know you have been visiting Raegan and Ryan’s school, and I was wondering if you could share how they deal with tantrums?
- Researcher: Really, why? Did something happen recently?
- Director: Yes, well yesterday they both had a tantrum and they usually listen to me, but now they are ignoring me. I’m really concerned now for the safety of my staff and the other kids. Because they had the tantrum in the open forum where other parents walked by and saw this happening. I mean I didn’t know what to do. And my number one priority is to keep everyone safe. Unfortunately, if this continues I may tell their mom to find somewhere else next year, because I know we only have you for a short while.
- Researcher: Really! Well I find that extremely strange that their tantrum has caused such a problem **now**². I’d be happy to share some strategies with you on what I do when I notice them getting frustrated. I don’t think that anyone here should worry about being harmed because of a tantrum from a five-year-old. I have seen their tantrums before and no one gets hurt.
- Director: She kicked me. I’m not making this up everyone in the forum saw.
- Researcher: No, I’m not saying that what you described isn’t true. I’m just saying I don’t think you need to worry about their tantrums getting violently out of hand. I know for starters, maybe one reason why they didn’t respond to you yesterday is because I notice you talk to them like babies.
- Director: What do you mean?
- Researcher: I mean you talk to them like babies. In a very babyish voice and you don’t display a sense of firmness, meaning they probably don’t take you seriously. I don’t know, I know I talk to them in my adult voice, and I usually give them one or two options to think about when they can’t have their way.
- Director: Well, I wasn’t taught that way. I don’t think I agree with your discipline approach. I can’t unlearn everything I was taught. I was taught to give them lots of options and I just don’t see that changing.

While I experienced no issues with the girls having a tantrum, the director felt it was a huge issue, one for which she needed advice from me, their Black teacher advocate, on how to control or at least prevent the Black girls from having another tantrum in the open forum where other parents could potentially see. The main message given to the director implied that her expectations of the girls were unrealistic. The director of the after-school program wanted clear answers on how to control and prevent a five-year-old Black girl from having a tantrum. This unrealistic expectation caused her behavior toward the girls to shift. What we know for sure is that teacher expectations matter and racial bias hinders student attainment (Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). The mere fact that the director expected the girls to behave a certain way is another example of how implicit racial bias plays out in informal learning spaces. The conversation between the researcher and the director presented an unexpected dialogue. This dialogue illustrates the researcher’s pre-existing understanding of why she must center the voices of the participants in this study and why her participation in the data collection was in many ways stressful. Moreover, the researcher’s anxieties and concerns were further intensified and complicated because her research is focused on the experiences of two Black girls who are marginalized in an after-school program where she worked. Prior to the school suspensions, both girls had tantrums before and not one time was the researcher asked to provide advice on how to control or manage their behaviors. Additionally, the director was educated by one of the most liberal Ivy League schools on the East Coast. Her attitude and failure to recognize the detrimental effects of trying to discipline young children in an after-school context seemed disingenuous. Unfortunately, the reaction of the administrator and

² Raegan and Ryan attended preschool at this site. This is their second year with teachers and staff.

teacher validates existing literature that describes early childhood teachers' attitudes about and practices toward the behavior and bodies of Black children seen as "at-risk" (Lee, 2017; Bates & Glick, 2013). However, when faced with different approaches to engaging with the Black girls' behaviors, the director immediately dismissed the researcher.

Conclusions

Trying to construct and map out the intersectionality of my own identity, that is as a Black researcher and Black female teacher, I am both frustrated and academically engaged with the tensions I faced. For starters, I had to deal with the work power dynamic within the research setting itself, between myself and the after-school care director. Especially when interviews and field notes were captured. I also had to be cognizant of how I approached data collection, because while I sought to seek out truths, I also had to cautiously avoid causing preventable harm among the participants. Throughout the study, I questioned my white peers and colleagues on whether they knew what it truly meant to teach other people's children as if they were our own (Delpit, 1995, 2006). After looking at my field notes from this study, I realized that to disrupt the adultification and racial biases of young Black girls in both formal and informal school sites, we must critically examine the discourses that play out in schools and take action that will bring about a change in teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards students of color. This study has also led me to inquire about the kinds of behaviors between white and Black people that cause some white people to claim to be color-blind. What happens when their liberal perspectives come up against real cultural differences? Is being liberal about a set of content how we should treat all children—or about a process—how we should listen to and engage across differences? What kinds of everyday interactions are taking place that will not allow them to see how racism produces unequal experiences and outcomes for Black people?

As it pertains to the research questions, this study revealed that (RQ1) in school disciplinary policies negatively impact the peer-to-peer interactions of Black girls who were stigmatized by exclusionary discipline practices in formal (school) and informal (after-school) settings. The side conversations that white students had pertaining to Regan and Ryan were rooted in what they believed to be true about their behavior. In the instances that I observed the girls didn't hear some of the snarky remarks, like "they're bad," but on other occasions the girls did hear unkind remarks, like "they're always actin' up." Consequently, I could see their self-esteem diminish and their temperament shift as a result of the nagging. (RQ 2) In what ways do predominately white informal learning spaces perpetuate in school punishment of Black girls? This track highlights ways in which white teachers and white students used language in divisive ways to perpetuate in-school punishment of Black girls. Through conversations and interviews, the level of empathy presented by both teachers and administrators were not comparable to that given to counterparts who were not labeled in the after-school program.

Implications

This study adds to the existing body of literature that sheds light on how Black girls are systematically being excluded and pushed out of school through zero-tolerance policies. More specifically, this study draws attention to how two Black girls were negatively impacted by these policies through exclusion and lack of empathy in an out-of-school context. Harmful labels placed on Black girls as early as five years old perpetuate the school stigma that Black children are "bad." School is a place where children go to learn, create, and imagine. For Black children, schools have now become sites of punishment (Love, 2023). This study reveals how after-school programs are also sites of punishment for Black children. This ethnographically informed case study explored how peer interactions, teacher perceptions, and administrator perceptions changed as a result of an in-school suspension given to one of the Black girls in the after-school program. These factors shed light on how kindergarten Black girls experience the discipline gap.

Moving forward, I urge educational leaders and teachers to (re)examine in-school disciplinary policies and consider: Who are these policies benefiting? Think about what happens when young students leave the classroom and enter into informal learning spaces. In particular, I suggest that educational leaders and researchers collaboratively support aftercare teachers with strategies that will foster positive educational experiences for Black girls rather than exclude them through push-out strategies and stigmatization.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributors

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