

During the 2017 – 2018 academic year, the SSO section of JoLLE will feature essays by scholars such as professors, teachers, students, and administrators who are engaging with discussions around social justice issues and racism in education and in modern society. Please click here for more information about this ongoing series: http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SSO-October-2017_Editors-Note_1.pdf.

Institutional Violence: The Assault on Black Girls in Schools

By Sherell A. McArthur, The University of Georgia

There is an assault on Black girls in schools. There is a fundamental problem nationally, and globally, when it comes to the policing of Black girls' identities, literacies, and ways of being. Our schools fail to intervene within the barrage of intellectual, physical, and emotional attacks on the minds, bodies, and spirits of girls of color, specifically Black girls. Schools are entrenched in inequity, racial and gender discrimination, and aggressive practices leaving Black girls' lives disavowed through the institution of schooling. For many children and youth, schools should be a safety net. However, the assaults that will be shared in this essay on Black girls within school spaces are deplorable and unacceptable.

The struggle is constant and continuous for Black girls. In today's sociopolitical climate, with the national reawakening of racial violence, theoretical allies just won't do. Therefore, educators must be better for their students. We live in critical and socially unjust times so it is imperative that we have what, may be, uncomfortable conversations. Audrey Lorde is quoted as saying, "Oppressors always expect the oppressed to extend to them the understanding so lacking in themselves." Hence, I am comfortable with the discomfort some of you who may read this might have if that will provide more comforts for the children and youth of color, specifically Black girls, in your classrooms and school spaces. As educators, what does it mean to be a practicing ally? In order for the toxicity in schools detailed in this essay to be demolished and rebuilt, you would have to believe three things: 1) that schools and education need to be transformed, 2) that schools can be transformative, and 3) that educators have active agency in that transformation.

This essay is calling on educators to be brave; to see what is happening in the schools around them, and to be daring enough to want

schools to be equitable, safe, intellectually invigorating, and liberatory. In Mary McLeod Bethune's last will and testament she wrote, "We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends." This remains impossible if Black girls continue to encounter institutional violence intellectually, physically, and emotionally in our schools.

Intellectual Violence

The intellectual violence that Black girls experience in schools is inherent in the Eurocentric curriculum and instruction. Many places are still struggling to incorporate a multicultural curriculum in their schools. [In 2010, Arizona banned ethnic studies classes and in 2017 this case was back in court.](#) It is purported that half of all school-aged children will be children of color by 2030, and yet, the curriculum is not reflective of the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity present in classrooms. Schools should provide mirrors and windows, so children and youth can see a reflection of themselves in the curriculum while also gaining an understanding of the cultural experiences of others (McArthur, 2016). Currently, schools annihilate the histories and experiences of the diverse American peoples.

In 2016, [a picture of a page from a Texas textbook](#) for World Geography went viral. The picture displayed "Patterns of Immigration" and included enslaved Africans in America, between the 1500s and 1800s, as immigrants. The text went further to describe enslaved Africans as workers. Categorizing enslaved Africans under immigration implies intentional moving, and workers imply paid for labor. Both of which is historically inaccurate and is an intellectual assault against African Americans in this country and sanctions children's historical illiteracy. This curriculum lacks acceptance of the complicated and complex history that weaves the tapestry of the United States.

In addition to not honoring the experiences of Black and Brown peoples in this country, Black girls are so often viewed as extremely deficient that their cognitive prowess is questioned. Consider the example of [Kiera Wilmot](#), a 16-year-old girl in a Florida high school in 2013. A student with good grades, no behavior record and who loved science. She conducted a science experiment, on the school grounds in front of her

friends, mixing toilet bowl cleaner and aluminum foil in a water bottle which caused the lid to pop off the bottle and emit smoke. For this, she was arrested, charged with two felonies, expelled and sent to an alternative school. Ultimately, due to the backlash the school received, she was permitted to return to her high school and the felony charges were dropped. What may have this done for her love of science? How may have this affront to her inquiry and intelligence shaped her aspirations? How often are Black girls' curiosity and exploration of knowledge, past the curriculum, thwarted? There are thousands of other Kiera Wilmots whose intellect is being devalued and imperiled; being written off as anti-intellectuals.

Physical Violence

Schools are physically oppressive spaces for Black girls. While schools should be liberating, they are confining. Black and Brown youth find themselves vigorously surveilled, scrutinized and criminalized. The level of physical violence, particularly from school administrators, resource officers, staff and teachers, on students is appalling. Further, the lack of response from teachers and administrators in racially motivated verbal and physical assaults amongst students is absurd. Consider these recent violent encounters on the bodies of Black girls.

In 2015, at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, a student-filmed cell phone [video](#) went viral, showing a school resource officer yank and body slam a 16-year old Black girl from her desk. He commenced to drag her across the floor and eventually slammed his knee into her back. The officer was fired, but he will not face local or federal charges. Meanwhile, the assaulted student and the student who filmed the attack were arrested. While those charges were dropped, their arrest highlights that Black girls disproportionately experience bias in school discipline and school-related arrests, like the overreaction to Kiera Wilmot's science experiment.

The Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls report, released by the National Women's Law Center and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, found that Black girls represent less than 17% of all female students but are 31% of girls referred to law enforcement and 43% of girls with a school-related arrest. It is clear that Black girls are perceived as a consistent threat to school communities.

A second example of the physical violence Black girls encounter in schools occurred in Waco, Texas in 2016. While on an overnight field trip, [a 12-year old Black girl was assaulted by three White boys, one of them known for bullying her](#). They tied a rope around her neck and dragged her. Not only did none of the teachers contact her parents when they were made aware of this assault, the school attempted to cover up these abhorrent actions—actions so severe that when her mother took her to the emergency room, the doctors thought her injuries were too grave to not call the police. Instead of addressing racially motivated issues directly, schools tend to leave those victimized further oppressed and isolated.

Let's not forget in Nashville, Tennessee in 2017, where two social media videos were posted showing a teacher [snatching a Black, Muslim girl's hijab](#) off of her head and commenting on how pretty her hair looked. Not only did the teacher demonstrate egregious behavior, but she also posted these videos of herself revealing her lack of cultural empathy and her blatant disregard and disrespect for the student's body and personal space.

The anti-Blackness and anti-woman-ness of schools are represented through intellectual and physical violence, and also the emotional assaults Black girls experience.

Emotional Violence

I have previously stated that the Eurocentric perspective of schools centers European culture. This means that students of color are expected to act and present themselves in ways that signify Whiteness, and not their own culture and values. For Black girls around the country (and even a recent case in Pretoria, South Africa) school dress code and appearance policies have risen in various schools and districts to prevent Black girls from wearing their hair in natural or cultural ways. Afros, braids, twists and locs are all cultural hairstyles. Yet, an [Ohio school attempted to ban afro puffs and twisted braids in 2013](#), a [high school junior was told she could not return to school her senior year, in Florida, unless she cut her afro](#), and [two sisters in Massachusetts were suspended, being told their braids were a distraction](#).

The suspensions Black girls around the country have

experienced as a result of these racially discriminatory school policies, necessitates a brief discussion on the subjectivity of school policies. Kimberle Crenshaw (2015) shared in the *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* report published by the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies and the African American Policy Forum, that Black girls experience more infractions due to *subjective* behavior. Black girls are more likely to be suspended based on judgment and value-laden assessments like being “disrespectful,” “loud,” or “sassy,” making them seven times more likely to be suspended than White girls. Thereby, to establish policies that counter the natural state of Black hair; that the natural curl of Black girls’ hair is punishable is violent policy and tells Black girls that who they naturally are is an unwanted presence in schools. The war on Black hairstyles is a cultural and emotional attack against Black girls. These racially biased school-based policies that target Black girls command that they shun their cultural embodiment and endorse hegemonic beauty ideals (Collins, 1991; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 2008; Poran, 2002; Trepagnier, 1994).

Conclusion

There are attacks happening to Black girls in schools across the country every day. It was not enough to only articulate physical violence as a measure of the assaults Black girls encounter in schools. It was important that the fuller scope of violence they experience was highlighted. If schools and school personnel are going to work to reduce the number of assaults Black girls encounter in schools, it was significant for me to convey the ways in which these girls are suffering under the institutional violence in schools. As educators, we want to believe the best about ourselves and our practice, and the school conditions we create for our students. However, understanding that there are attacks, and how Black girls are experiencing them, is vital to working towards reducing these places of violence in our schools.

Allow me to generate a few thoughts from my own work with Black girls over the years, as a former elementary classroom teacher and a program facilitator. I co-created and have facilitated a critical media literacy collective, titled Beyond Your Perception (BYP) for four years and have worked with girls in Atlanta and Boston, USA and Cape Town, South Africa. In my work with girls, and aiming to understand their schooling

experiences, I have found that Black girls, largely judged by educators' preconceived notions of people in their identity groups, desire the chance to authentically be themselves without prescriptions for their racialized-gendered identities (Muhammad & McArthur, 2014). In BYP, we discuss the educational, social, and emotional experiences the girls' unique racialized-gender identities encompass. Through our work, the girls often share feelings of liberation and empowerment. Kai, one of BYP's participants once said, "Here, I just get to be me!" In one of her writings, Sy, another BYP member, wrote, "I am not the fullness of my lips, but the capacity of my mind," when asked to reflect on how she is perceived in school. Additionally, Amber, a fifth-grade member of BYP, when asked why she was beyond the perception of how she was regarded in schools, shared "I will always love myself for who I am, not for who [they] want me to be!"

At the core of my approach, I work to understand their varied experiences at the intersections of their identities and hope to learn as much from them as they learn from me. I engage them to listen to the ways they communicate who and how they are. The stories they tell and the language they use to describe their experiences is powerful.

In her Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison said, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; it does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge." Consider the language of textbooks that diminish the horrid experience of enslaved Africans in this country to "workers." Consider the language connected to expulsion and arrest for students exercising their scientific curiosity. Consider the language of discipline and hair policies that liken the Black girl aesthetic and identity as disruptive to the school culture. Not only is there power in the words we use, and the words we choose not to use, but there is also power in our silence.

Silence can be an act of violence when we choose not to speak up against injustice. In order to demolish the toxic structure of schools, if now you recognize that education and schools need to be transformed, then what is required is that you begin to use your agentic power in that transformation. Educators and schools must forgo intellectually, physically, and emotionally violent mechanisms and strategies of oppression and embrace purposive efforts to reduce the institutional violence Black girls encounter in schools.

References

- Bethune, M.M. (1955, August). Last Will and Testament. *Ebony Magazine*.
- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought; knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K.W., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected*. Retrieved from www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/sites/default/files/uploads/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- McArthur, S. A. (2016). Black girls and critical media literacy for social activism. *English Education*, 48(4), 462-479.
- Morrison, T. (1993, December). Nobel Lecture [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/index.php?id=1502>
- Muhammad, G. E., & McArthur, S. A. (2014). "Styled by their perceptions": Adolescent girls' interpretations of Black girlhood in the media. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 17(3), 1-8.
- Okazawa-Rey, M., Robinson, T., & Ward, J. V. (1987). Black women and the politics of skin color and hair. *Women & Therapy*, 6(1-2), 89-102.
- Poran, M.A. (2002). Denying diversity: Perceptions of beauty and social comparison processes among Latina, Black and White women. *Sex Roles*, 47(1-2), 65-81.
- Trepagnier, B. (1994). The politics of White and Black bodies. *Feminism & Psychology*, 4(1), 199-205.
- Smith-Evans, L., & George, J. (2014). *Unlocking opportunity for African American Girls: A call to action for educational equity*. Retrieved from http://www.naacpldf.org/files/publications/Unlocking%20Opportunity%20for%20African%20American%20Girls_o.pdf

Sherell A. McArthur is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia. Her research interests include Black girls and identity, media literacy development of children and youth, parents' media literacy, popular culture as an educative site, and Social Justice Education. Her research agenda focuses on the intersectionality of gender, race, and class and popular culture engagement in the lives of girls of color in and out of school settings, and the role of both parents and teachers in their identity construction and academic successes. She facilitates this through *Beyond Your Perception*, an afterschool critical media literacy collective for girls of color.

