

MATH, CONFINEMENT, AND BLACK GIRL TEARS

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As I completed the required core courses of my Ph.D. program, my attention shifted to taking the preliminary examination—in essence, a checkpoint for ensuring the ability to make an argument supported through concepts drawn from existing texts. From the list texts that are approved for the assignment, I chose *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique W. Morris (2016) to understand the educational, judicial, and societal disparities experienced by Black girls. Given the prevalence of stories in the media, instances of exclusionary discipline against Black girls have been observed in conversation with zero-tolerance policies. These policies are masked as attempts to hold all to the same standard but are rigid and lack cultural relevance, disproportionately punishing Black girls. For example, Tiana Parker [September 2013] was sent home and later switched schools after wearing dreadlocks, Mya and Deanna Cook [April 2017] were given detention and threatened with suspension for wearing braided hair extensions, and Kaia Rolle [September 2019], a first grader, was arrested and charged after throwing a temper tantrum due to a sleep disorder. Such policies and practices usher Black girls into the school-to-prison pipeline (Klein, 2013; Coleman, 2017; Onley, 2020). Morris (2016) introduces the expansive term “school-to-confinement pathways,” accounting for the multitude of ways Black girls are surveilled, restricted, and confined (p. 12). This term resonated with me as I looked to make sense of my own disciplinary experience in K-12 schools.

The autobiographical method of *currere* constructed by Pinar (1975/1995) moves through the phases of regressive, progressive, analytical, and syncretical (p. 19). In doing so the *currerean* engages in a journey of “critical self-reflection and contemplation, giving share to an internal dialogue” (Baszile, 2017, p. vi). As Baszile (2015) calls our attention to centering voices of Women of Color in academic spaces, I write this with voices that “have been absent, ignored, misconstrued, distorted, repressed in the curriculums that shape our lives, the curricula of schooling and media, in particular” (p. 2). In this paper, I provide a definition of the school-to-prison pipeline and utilize Pinar’s (1975/1995) method of *currere* to explore Black girls and school-to-confinement pathways. Within this process, I will seek to understand my past experiences and envision and advocate for schooling for Students of Color, specifically for Black girls, that is safe, supportive and ultimately dismantles the school-to-prison pipeline.

SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

The American Civil Liberties Union (n.d.) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as “school discipline practices, such as suspension and referrals to law enforcement, that funnel youth out of public education and into the juvenile and criminal legal systems” (n.p.), disproportionately affecting Students of Color. To be clear it is not that Students of Color are participating in delinquent acts at higher rates than white students, but rather that they are found responsible at higher rates. In the 2017–18 school year, 38.8% of students expelled with educational services and 33.3% of students expelled without educational services were Black, despite accounting for only

15.1% of total students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). While data shows that Black boys comprise most suspensions and expulsions, Black girls have increasingly entered the mix (Morris, 2016; Winn, 2011). As Morris (2016) writes, despite Black girls being alongside Black boys, Black girls often go unnoticed (p. 2). The notion of invisibility is one that many Women of Color experience. For myself, instances of invisibility in education have presented in the classroom and the workforce.

BLACK GIRL TEARS

My middle school math teacher had just finished the day's lesson and had given us time to get started on the assigned homework. Confused, I sat in silence avoiding making any eye contact. Hearing the click clacks of my peers' pencils and calculators, mine remained fixed. My attempt to go unnoticed failed as the teacher began to make their rounds up and down the rows of desks. As they approached my desk, it was clear the only line I had completed was my name. They said, "*You need to do your work.*" Unable to form a sentence to tell them I had no idea where to begin, tears began to flow like a faucet with a faulty seal. I could not stop them even if I wanted to. The teacher returned to their desk and after a few minutes summoned me to the front of the class. Still crying, they proceeded to say, "*Let's send an email to your mother about your behavior in class.*" As they hunched over me, I stared at the screen, perplexed at the request but also without words. What was I supposed to say? "*Hey Mom, I'm in math class right now. I don't understand how to do the work, and because I've been crying at my desk, Mrs. Pearson told me to send you an email instead of helping me.*" While this does indeed disclose my behavior in class and my math teacher's actions, I doubt this is what they had in mind. After a few minutes of sitting at their desk in front of the computer screen it was clear their frustration was mounting through my non-compliance with their request. I never sent an email, and soon I was escorted out of class with the packet of work to go to in-school-suspension.

As I walked into the room, I was given the three rules: (1) sign-in, (2) face forward, and (3) no talking. Signing my name on the sign-in sheet made my stay a real fixture—a record that I could not erase. The seating resembled an office cubicle. I could not see out, only they could see in. Remember rule three? No talking. I no longer had access to the teacher who was supposed to help me, and I was unable to seek assistance from others. Through this experience, I acquired a distaste for the subject of math. I declared that I was not "good" at it and internalized an unworthiness of receiving help. After all, my Black girl tears didn't say anything anyway (not to them).

PUSHED OUT

As I move to the progressive phase of currere, I pause my personal story and engage the imaginary in a way that weaves research and experiences of Black girls who have been pushed out. The following anecdote serves as an example of how in-school suspension may usher Black girls into carceral systems. Through this anecdote I not only paint a picture of instruction in a space of confinement that is not conducive to the process of learning but call attention to the complexities of obtaining an education without supportive structures and access to resources.

Eventually, there were no more Black girl tears to shed. I understood through the demonstration of my middle school math teacher that, even if I shed them, they'd be shed in silence. I stopped trying to "get It," and my teachers didn't seem to care, so why should I? It wouldn't be my last time sent to in-school suspension, and I guess you could say I elevated myself because instead of in-school-suspension, it was confinement in a juvenile detention center. Surrounded by chaos, isolation and bleakness, very little "learning" took place there.

When it came to teaching, there was no sense of a planned curriculum. The teacher (of the day) seemed to make up the lesson as they went, and that's if there actually was a lesson. I placed "of the day" in parentheses because it seemed as if there was an ever-revolving door of teachers. They did not seem prepared and certainly didn't seem as if they wanted to be there. It honestly felt like they were volun-told rather than volunteered, let alone had passion for teaching students like us. Similar to what I experienced in in-school-suspension, we frequently were given packets of worksheets to complete. Oftentimes the assigned work was clearly below my grade level, and the few times where the assignments appeared to be on par with my grade level, the teachers did not seem interested in explaining how to do the work. In spite of my effort to get something out of their teaching, or lack thereof, there were constant echoes of what I'd done, rather than what I could become. These remarks came not only from the facility teachers but correctional staff as well. I began to believe them and disengaged from facility education.

You would think that my release from juvenile detention would be a good thing, which was partially true. However, I was unable to return to public school, and the charter and private schools in the area wouldn't dare to take their chances. I was no longer in a restrictive environment that drummed inferiority into me, but I was left to navigate life without arguably one of the most important documents for engaging in society—a high school diploma. The other option was to successfully pass the GED (e.g., general education development) tests. Given the education received in juvenile detention, I did not feel confident and certainly did not have the money to pay for the tests. I was left to figure out my next steps on my own. Without a high school diploma or GED, opportunities to succeed were few and far between. To make ends meet I found myself engaging in illegal activities. These actions would catch up with me, and this time I would spend years in a prison.

BACK TO REALITY

While entering juvenile detention and later prison was not my actual, lived experience, serving in-school-suspension significantly impacted my relationship with schooling and authority. Prior to the in-school suspensions, I enjoyed school, for the most part. Although comprehension of course material was difficult at times, I had felt comfortable enough to voice the need for assistance. From the time that I was first sent to in-school suspension onward, my inclination to ask for assistance diminished. This has not and should not be viewed as a badge of honor but rather should be recognized as a byproduct of exclusionary discipline. As I remember this experience and reflect on how it impacted my educational experiences, I am brought to a few deeper conversations: authority/student-teacher relationship, implications of absence from instruction, and inferiority.

First, the student-teacher relationship is a powerful aspect of pedagogy—pedagogy being the way in which a teacher chooses to enact curriculum. While teachers are often viewed as the people doing the teaching (in a traditional view of pedagogy) the student cannot be removed from

the equation. I did not share this earlier, but my middle school math teacher was also a teacher that I had in the past. While it is plausible that I may be suppressing previous memories with this teacher, I cannot recall any situations that stand out as being particularly upsetting. Not that I expected to receive any special treatment, but I was under the assumption that this teacher perhaps would be even more inclined to help given our history. I do not pretend to know why my middle school math teacher on that day demanded that I write an email to my mother and sent me to in-school-suspension instead of just providing assistance, but I do know that teaching is no easy feat. To be clear, I am not excusing their behavior; however, through teaching college level courses myself, I understand the challenges teaching may present. Perhaps my teacher thought I didn't care or didn't want to understand. In transparency, this thought is one that I myself have had internally when teaching, when I feel as though I have explained the material enough that an understanding should be possible for my students. I am reminded that we as educators and learners do not know when our understandings will come to fruition (Poetter, 2019, p. 111). How do we as educators learn to be ok with this? What is at stake when we allow our frustrations to overcome demonstrating empathy in the classroom? While I still do not claim to be a math expert, I understand a little more now.

Second, in-school-suspension resulted in an absence from instruction. At the rate that instruction took place, an absence from one class period held the power to greatly affect my performance in the class moving forward. Moreover, when it came to math specifically, the lessons continued to build off one another, further emphasizing the need to understand material as it is presented. In the case of being pushed out of school and being subject to learning within juvenile facilities, this compounds the situation. Not only does the student have minimal, if any, contact with their traditional teacher, they also are subject to the curriculum and pedagogy of the facility. While it is plausible that the student may be provided with the work that is being presented in their traditional classroom, the question remains whether the student would be able to complete the material without their traditional teacher and whether the facility teacher is willing to assist if needed. However, as demonstrated in the anecdote, the absence from instruction that I experienced from serving in-school suspension is rather miniscule in terms of what could be.

Third is the lingering sense of inferiority. In my middle school math class, it was demonstrated that my Black girl tears were not seen as a signal for assistance but rather a disruption. I feared that even if I did gain the courage to ask for help it would not be given, and the person would now know that I did not know how to do something or even worse I would be chastised. Despite continuing education and being a working professional, these fears are still so intense that I often fight an internal insistence to figure it out on my own at the cost of my peace.

DISCUSSION

This is a story that I have been reluctant to share. However, as an educator and advocate for dismantling of the school-to-prison pipeline, processing what has happened alongside the work I hope to carry through is essential. The school-to-prison pipeline stands as a critically important issue within the realm of education and criminal justice, shedding light on systemic disparities that disproportionately affect Students of Color, and increasingly Black girls. Regardless of whether Black girls end up in confinement, the emotional burdens they carry from the experiences within the pipeline may be profound and lasting. The emotional burden is not confined to the moments of punitive action but can create a persistent sense of inferiority and a reluctance to seek help,

complicating the broader challenge of navigating an educational system that often fails to provide the necessary support and understanding. Addressing the school-to-prison pipeline requires a comprehensive approach that considers not only the immediate consequences of exclusionary disciplinary actions but also the long-term emotional and psychological effects on Black girls as they navigate their educational journeys.

In recognizing the impact of pedagogy that is dismissive, I urge educational leaders to practice culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). As explained by Ladson-Billings (1995), CRP centers three components, 1) students and their academic success, 2) development and/or maintenance of cultural competence, and 3) development of critical consciousness in a manner that challenges the social order (p. 160). The component of academic success recognizes that there are indisputable skills that students must learn to be successful and “requires that teachers attend to students’ academic needs” (p. 160). The component of cultural competence links this academic success to intentionality around how teachers choose to teach course material. In this component, teachers are encouraged to “utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (p. 161). The use of music, parental involvement, and home language are examples of bridging to curriculum (p. 161). In the conceptualization of this component, ultimately, I refer back to whether a student can see their full selves reflected in the curriculum. The last component of critical consciousness highlights the need for “students to develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 162). In order for students to develop this critical and analytical reflexivity, it is essential teachers practice this in the classroom.

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