

# CAN WE LIVE? WORKING TOWARD A PRAXIS OF SUPPORT FOR CAREFREE BLACK GIRLS

By **Aja Reynolds** and **Stephanie D. Hicks**

*“My child—and I’m not mad at her—she was brave enough to speak out against what was going on, and didn’t back down. And it resulted in her being arrested. . . . But looking at the video, who was really disturbing the school? Was it my daughter? Or was it the officer that came into the classroom and did that to the young girl?”*

—Doris Kenny, mother of Spring Valley High School student Niya Kenny, who spoke out against the forcible restraint and arrest of her SVHS classmate

In October of 2015, a Black student at Spring Valley High School was forcibly removed from her desk and thrown across a classroom by Sheriff’s Deputy Ben Fields, a White school resource officer. The officer and school officials contended the student was handled so aggressively because she refused to surrender her cellular phone and leave the classroom when asked.

A video of the incident taken by another student went viral on the Internet, commanding the attention of national news outlets, law enforcement officials and supporters, and political and religious leaders. Reactions ranged from skepticism about the cause of the incident, to defense of the officer, to questions about why witnesses—school staff and students—did not intervene. Eventually, background research on the officer revealed that this was not the first time Deputy Fields used aggressive force with students; he was under investigation for targeting Black and Latino students at schools in which he worked.<sup>1</sup>

Outraged students, parents, community members, and activists sounded off online and elsewhere in the media. Why was such force used? Could anything the student have done justify Deputy Fields’s response? Why was the student’s “disruptive” behavior deemed a criminal act and not a school discipline issue? Would the officer’s action been different if the student was White? Would the officer have even been called? And what are the ramifications of having resource officers (SROs) in schools at all? Scholars and activists who focus on the school-to-prison pipeline broadly, and the criminalization of black women and girls specifically, were a loud dissenting voice amid the chorus of supporters for SROs and their use of force. We place this incident in the context of the criminalization of Black women and girls with the aim to advocate for changes in Black girls’ schooling experiences.

## The Criminalization of Black Women and Girls

From 1985 to 1997, Black girls were the fastest growing segment of the juvenile justice population.<sup>2</sup> By 2010, Black girls were 36 percent of juvenile females in residential placement.<sup>3</sup> In examining data from the 2011–2012 academic year, the Department of Education found that Black girls were six times more likely to be suspended than White girls.<sup>4</sup> During that academic year, Black girls represented approximately 12 percent of the suspensions compared to 2 percent for White girls.

Using the lens of anti-Blackness, intellectuals Connie Wun and Michael Dumas have contributed rich critiques of schooling for Black children.<sup>5</sup> They re-identify educational institutions as prisons, reliant on policing Black bodies and diminishing their sense of agency. Their studies have challenged the school-to-prison pipeline, pointing us to a deeper analysis of the ways schools operate as prisons and as site of trauma for Black students. Literature focusing on the imprisonment and surveillance of Black women helps us understand schools as an apparatus of prison systems.<sup>6</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectional analysis intervention provided a method to assess the nuances of oppression

experienced by Black girls.<sup>7</sup> Their work details the racism, sexism, and misogyny Black women and girls experience, and offers critiques with intent to dismantle these oppressive systems.

### **Black Girls in School**

In recent years, more research that centers the strengths and assets of Black children has been generated, but it predominantly focuses on the plight of Black boys. An effect of this trend is that we see Black girls as marginal.<sup>8</sup> Taken together, these problems—the lack of focus on asset-based Black education research, the typifying of Black communities as problematic, and the disregard of the plight of Black girls in schools—could be considered a crisis in Black education. What can centering the effects of school discipline on Black girls do for Black education research as a field? And what can it do for Black girls?

When Black girls in schools display behaviors that are deemed “ghetto,” or a deviation from the social norms that construct acceptable behavior according to a narrow, White middle-class scope of femininity, they are deemed non-conforming and thereby subject to criminalizing responses.<sup>9</sup> In a study by AAPF and CCISPS, Black girls expressed that teachers spent a profound amount of time correcting their behavior, much more time than spent on teaching.<sup>10</sup> Teachers perceive Black girls as being “loud, defiant, and precocious,” and Black girls are more likely than their White or Latina peers to be reprimanded for being “unladylike.”<sup>11</sup> In Grant’s research, emphasis placed by teachers on learning and performing social skills was less apparent for White girls, Black boys, and White boys than Black girls.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Grant’s work suggested that educators expressed more interest in promoting the social—rather than academic—skills of Black girls. Some Black women teachers also play an active role in trying to correct Black girls’ behaviors, but with the consciousness of the implications of these stereotypes.<sup>13</sup> In other words, they are trying to protect Black girls from being reprimanded for not being “ladylike” according to White middle-class

standards. bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins developed foundational critical Black feminist theories to deconstruct White supremacist patriarchal influences that creep into intimate spaces in Black communities: the home, church, and organizing spaces.<sup>14</sup> Their contributions challenged respectability politics and created new possibilities for Black women to define themselves.

Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman intently explore the dehumanization of Black women under the conditions of slavery and the “after-life of slavery” that animates anti-Blackness today.<sup>15</sup> Their work forces us to wrestle with our “captive” or enslaved African experiences and the ways those experiences shape our identities and all sectors of Black life, including educational institutions. Their work suggests that we refer to previous Black feminist critiques when formulating research and theories that address the experiences of Black girls in school, and that we support the resistance of Black girls to better support them.

### **Creating Spaces of/for “Carefree Black Girls”**

In order to effectively contend with the neglect of Black girls, we must not only begin and end with images of them being tackled, dragged, and punched by White law enforcement, we must critically assess all of the ways they are disposed of daily, socially and literally. Programs aimed solely at supporting Black boys, like the White House Initiative, reinforce the invisibility of Black girls. Several spectacles of Black girls being violently apprehended by law enforcement in schools and at pools last year, unfortunately, exposed truths about the vulnerability of Black girls’ bodies to police brutality, and reminded Black girls that they must repeatedly come to their own rescue. These situations should not be read as new phenomena, but should be understood as part of a tradition that legitimizes the use of violence to control the behaviors of Black girls inside and outside of the community. The emphasis on “correcting” behavior, as discussed previously in this article, demonstrates this historical commitment to manipulating Black bodies.

In our experience, “carefree” Black girls become the most targeted in educational spaces. They unapologetically embrace their Black girl identity, and will aggressively protect their right to exist. Consistently, they are defying the social contract, and articulating their protest to such restrictions through various expressions, both verbally and nonverbally. It is imperative that as we are deconstructing and interpreting the systems of oppressions that impact the lives of Black girls, we simultaneously construct spaces for Black girls to become their most authentic selves. Rather than criminalizing them for being “sassy” or “unladylike,” we must be willing to relinquish conventional ideas of respectability to better affirm “carefree” Black girls. More than creating a space for them to express themselves, we must commit ourselves to responding to their needs lovingly, appropriately, and effectively.

### Conclusion — Using Research to Advocate for Black Girls

What does creating spaces for “carefree Black girls” mean for Black educators? And what does it mean for the field of Black education?

In classrooms, schools, and other educational spaces, it means that teachers and school staff must recognize the informal and formal policies that criminalize Black girls disproportionately. This includes interrogating what speech and nonverbal responses are deemed appropriate while deepening knowledge about the ways in which racism and sexism have informed the relationship between schools and law enforcement. It also means holding ourselves accountable when crafting and enforcing school discipline policies, and questioning our motives.

In Black education research broadly, we must interrogate Black girls’ in-school experiences. This work cannot be tangential. We must also collectively articulate the kind of world we want to give to Black girls. If an aim of our research is to inform future educational practices with the hope of improving the educational experiences of Black students, we must ask what world our findings are preparing them for. Is that the world we hope to create for them?

### Notes

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9. Kristi Holsinger and Alexander M. Holsinger, “Different Pathways to Violence and Self-Injurious Behavior: African American and White Girls in the Juvenile Justice System,” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 42, no. 2 (2005): 211–42.
10. Jamilia J. Blake, Bettie Ray Butler, Chance Lewis and Alicia Darenbourg, “Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls: Implications for Urban Educational Stakeholders,” *Urban Review* 43, no. 1 (2011):

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12. Karolyn Tyson, “Notes from the Back of the Room: Problems and Paradoxes in the Schooling of Young Black Students,” *Sociology of Education* 76, no. 4 (2003): 326–43.

13. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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## LESSON PLAN:

### **CAN WE LIVE? A TIMELINE OF BLACK WOMEN AND GIRLS’ PUNISHMENT AND PROMISE**

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#### **Connections to Middle School and/or High School**

Timelines can be used to help students understand the context of historical and current events. They can also be used creatively to encourage students to (1) construct a large-scale timeline of Black women and girls’ interactions with law enforcement in school, (2) facilitate a classroom discussion about these girls’ stories and the policies that provided context for them, and (3) construct a future timeline that features alternative discipline policies at the school, district, state, and

national levels. Students should be encouraged to insert themselves into this future.

### **Goals and Objectives of Lesson Plan**

- Create and deepen awareness of Black girls' interactions with law enforcement in schools and the school-to-prison pipeline
- Critically examine and respond to policies and laws that shape students' in-school experiences
- Participate in large and small group discussions based on readings and research
- Create a historical timeline that highlights and connects the individual stories of people and the actions of large institutions (legal system, schools, etc.)

### **National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards: US History Teacher Expectations: Adapted from *National Standards for Social Studies Teachers*.**

- Assist learners in utilizing chronological thinking so that they can distinguish between past, present, and future time; can place historical narratives in the proper chronological framework; can interpret data presented in timelines; and can compare alternative models for periodization;
- Guide learners in practicing skills of historical analysis and interpretation, such as compare and contrast, differentiate between historical facts and interpretations, consider multiple perspectives, analyze cause and effect relationships, compare competing historical narratives, recognize the tentative nature of historical interpretations, and hypothesize the influence of the past;
- Help learners to identify issues and problems in the past, recognize factors contributing to such problems, identify and analyze alternative courses of action, formulate a position or course of action, and evaluate the implementation of that decision;
- Enable learners to develop historical understanding through the avenues of social, political, economic, and cultural history and the history of science and technology;
- Help learners understand the concepts of role, status, and social class and use them in describing the connections and interactions of individuals, groups, and institutions in society;
- Help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;
- Explain to learners the various forms institutions take, and explain how they develop and change over time;
- Assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions;
- Enable learners to describe and examine belief systems basic to specific traditions and laws in contemporary and historical movements;

- Challenge learners to evaluate the role of institutions in furthering both continuity and change;
- Guide learner analysis of the extent to which groups and institutions meet individual needs and promote the common good in contemporary and historical settings;
- Assist learners as they explain and apply ideas and modes of inquiry drawn from behavioral science and social theory in the examination of persistent social issues and problems.

### Activity

- Using the Endnotes section of the *Black Girls Matter* report, have students read stories about black girls' interactions with police in schools.
- Use paper, markers, printed pictures, glue, and tape to construct a classroom-scale timeline of these incidents. Students can add their own stories to the timeline as well.
- Have students insert into the timeline the local, state, and national education policies that contribute to the girls' criminalization in schools.
- Facilitate a classroom discussion about these girls and women's stories and the policies that provided context for them.
- Allow students to construct a future timeline that features alternative discipline policies at the school, district, state, and national levels.

### Assessment

Partial assessment takes place as the students construct the futuristic timeline during the activity; students' ability to imagine alternative discipline policies and practices depends upon the critical thinking that took place in the classroom discussion. Additional assessment can take place in another classroom discussion following the construction of the futuristic timeline. Students should be encouraged to share with the group their ideas for future practices and policies. Students can also share their ideas in an informal free-writing exercise prior to the second classroom discussion.

### Teacher Resources

- Kimberle Crenshaw, Priscilla Ocen, and Jyoti Nanda, *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected* (New York: Columbia Law School Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2015).
- Student handbooks, school district codes of conduct, and national policy briefs as needed.