"I Don't Think They Like Us": School Suspensions as Anti-Black Male Practice

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With the ongoing state-sponsored police murder of unarmed Black males serving as backdrop, this study challenges Black male criminalization in schools. This study is important because ongoing hyper-surveillance of Black males in and outside of schools, bolstered by historic and contemporary stereotypes of Black men as criminals, ultimately provides the infrastructures for police brutality and punishment. The article thus makes the case that Black males are intentionally removed from schools and placed into the school-to-prison pipeline. As racialized policies, practices and procedures decrease educational opportunities and increase the probability of future incarceration, the findings inform the understanding of how discipline affects Black male students. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used to frame a study of nine Black male high school students who have experienced out-of-school suspensions. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted, revealing racial disparities, teacher and administrator racism, and ongoing punishment beyond the initial suspension. These Black males ultimately suggest that drastic transformation is needed to shift from schools as a societal tool to criminalize Black youth and into processes that affirm and support Black survival.

Keywords: Racism in Schools, Black Males in Education, School Discipline

We are living in the era of Trayvon Martin, an era where the silencing and killing of Black men is normalized through viral YouTube videos, Snapchat images, tweets, and public posts (Taylor, 2016). Since Trayvon Martin's murder, police shootings of unarmed Black males have continued unabated, within ongoing anti-Black violence happening across the United States (U.S.). The recent police murders of George Floyd, Daniel Prude, and Rayshard Brooks, to name but a small few, demonstrate how such violence is common (Edwards et al., 2020). As protests challenge the ongoing murder of Black people by the state, the U.S. criminal justice system remains unaccountable for its anti-Black violence (Walker & Archibald, 2018). Parallel protests have erupted across schools, further arguing against what Black children see as systemic criminalization of Black males (Watson el al., 2018).

These protests specifically challenge U.S. schools as maintaining an educational landscape of anti-Blackness, teaching children of all races to foster and tolerate anti-Blackness,

and to disassociate from violence against Black men (Knaus, 2011). For Black men, discipline-influenced educational policies continue to be used to control Black males and limit educator response (Rios, 2011). This systemic anti-Blackness is amplified by colonial schools that enact racism through White-framed curriculum, pedagogies, and school structures, as well as societal laws (Feagin, 2013; Husband, 2014). Even as calls to remove police officers from schools proliferate, Black children continue to navigate the school to prison, or the school-to-grave, pipeline (Watson et al., 2018). Meanwhile, non-Black ethnic groups are further encouraged to enact violence against Black communities (Feagin, 2006; Feagin, 2013). The example of George Zimmerman, himself a person of color, murdering Trayvon Martin in 2014 captures this attempted control over Black bodies (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). These assassinations echo the many examples of public policing of Black people at BBQs, while jogging, in parks, in their own yards, and simply trying to survive (Austin, 1998; Ellis, 2014; Farzan, 2018).

As U.S. society continues to foster violent anti-Blackness, disciplinary procedures are a normalized experience for Black males in schools. Indeed, systemic anti-Black racism manifests through school disciplinary policies like zero tolerance and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), leading to school suspensions that align with societal racism to silence Black males. From the moment Black children enter school, they are dehumanized and criminalized (Johnson & Johnson, 2014; Love, 2016). As a recent public example, in March 2017, a video of a police officer choking a young Black male in a Pittsburgh high school office went viral (Abadi, 2017). As media coverage highlights brutality against minoritized Black communities, Black children continue to face humiliation through excessive punishment from the police (Love, 2016). State violence against Black people has been a function of U.S. society since emancipation, and Black males have a one in 1,000 chance to die at the hands of police (Coles, 2019; Edwards et al., 2019; Fitzgerald, 2006). Ironically, even as the social isolation from the COVID-19 pandemic might have offered temporary respite, police brutality and societal anti-Blackness continues to violently challenge Black existence (Edwards, et al., 2020).

To examine how contexts of anti-Blackness are fostered in schools, this study explored school suspensions as disciplinary practice on Black male students. Two guiding questions framed research methods, including an examination of the impact of school suspensions on Black male students, and how these students saw their own experience within the school to prison pipeline. Working within a mid-sized suburban school district in the Pacific Northwest, the lead author interviewed nine students who had been district suspended. Participants described their experiences in relation to school processes that silenced them, being improperly punished as a result, and having to navigate teacher racism. In what comes next, we clarify the school to prison pipeline and disciplinary approaches to surveille and exclude Black males from schools. We then highlight critical race theory, outline interviews, and share key findings, including suspensions as a process designed to silence, and educator racism shaping Black male school experiences.

Revisiting the Anti-Blackness of the School to Prison Pipeline

While the U.S. initially saw schools as a tool of colonization for Indigenous and Mexican residents, access to schooling was withheld from enslaved Black people. During slavery, Black children and adults were violently punished for trying to read; Black learning was, in practice, made illegal, often under punishment of death. These efforts to hinder Black learning were based on the notion that a literate Black populace was dangerous; the desire for literacy was intimately tied to the desire for freedom (Williams, 2005). Not coincidentally, Black people were (in theory)

freed in the late 1800s, just as the common school was being rolled out across the U.S. (Spring, 2018). Public schools continued to exclude specific populations across the foundation of the U.S., while a sustained criminalization of Black people, and in particular, Black males, has been maintained despite decades of struggle for access into public schools (Watkins, 2001). The use of punishment as a tool to limit Black learning within schools has remained and this process is often referred to as the school to prison pipeline (Wald & Losen, 2003).

Historical Context of Anti-Blackness

The foundations of the school to prison pipeline are not new. While legal practices kept Black children from historically White school systems, the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions issued forth a symbolic victory of integration, while excluding Black-centric education (Bell, 2004). Rather than integrate Black children into well-resourced White schools, the *Brown* decisions sent Black children into White schools with White teachers unprepared and often unwilling to teach Black learners (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). This victory resulted in the closure of Black schools, the mass firing of Black educators, and sent a message that White educators were intrinsically better than Black educators (Bell, 2004; Tillman, 2004). The implementation of *Brown* further justified White control, removing Black educators from schools (Irvine, 1988). Hudson and Holmes (1994) argued that the intended consequence of the "loss of African American teachers in the post-Brown era emerged the widespread belief among new White teachers that Black students could not learn, and that, if they did learn, they could never master critical thinking skills" (p. 390). This White supremacist thought exacerbated the structural removal of Black males from schools through initiation of school discipline (Hawkins, 1994).

While the U.S. had long criminalized Black bodies, a related accompanying attempt created images of Black males as ignorant and juvenile (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). *Brown* fostered White supremacy in schools, accompanied by a parallel use of stereotypes about Black intellectual inferiority and fears of Black male sexuality (Ramsey, 2005). These characteristics were portrayed in some of the first films ever created (e.g., Birth of a Nation, Blackface, Uncle Tom, Gone with the Wind, Song of the South) (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). The Birth of a Nation (Griffith, 1915), for example, portrayed the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as a heroic force that would reestablish the government (Mintz, 2012; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). These depictions fostered the idea that being controlled by the state was in Black people's interests (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). But even before these depictions, Smith (1893) proclaimed that Black people were more prone to violence and aggressive behaviors, fostering racist ideology to justify excessive force on Black males (Nolen, 1968; Litwack, 2004).

Within a modern era, the War on Drugs became a driving force to frame Black men as savages to be funneled into the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2011; Mauer, 2002). In the 1990s, a public opinion poll revealed that the public substantially overestimated the likelihood of being victimized by a person of color (Moriearty & Carson, 2012). As Black males were depicted as super-predators, news media increasingly encouraged police to use violent tactics (Davis, 2017; Gross, 2008; Hudson, 2011). Similar approaches are used today, as media channels release criminal records after someone is killed, encouraging viewers to see Black victims as violent criminals (Gross, 2008). Within a contemporary context of video clips depicting police brutality, the wider public is often seen applauding racial profiling, racialized sentencing differences, and disproportionate imprisonment for both youth and adults of color (Dorfman & Schiraldi, 2001; Glassner, 1999; Welch, 2007). Corporate media continue to use coded terms like

"dangerous" and "thug" to justify murders of unarmed Black people (Jaffe, 2014; Sanburn, 2014; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016).

Such state-sanctioned violence reflects societal investments in anti-Blackness. Porter (2015) found that "the prison system has become a very profitable business venture in America's modern, capitalistic society" (p. 59). Porter (2015) explained that "the interest of private prisons lies not in the obvious social good of having the minimum necessary of inmates but in having as many as possible, housed as cheaply as possible" (p. 60). As domestic companies continue to benefit from forced labor, unjust policing funnels more children behind bars (Porter, 2015). Private prisons actively lobby for policies that encourage disproportionate punishment, including the use of school-based police officers (Davis, 2017; Melber, 2013; Porter, 2015). Such violent, anti-Black incidents combine with prison expansions to normalize school disciplinary practices that remove Black students from learning.

Marking Black males as criminals has influenced a racial narrative in every societal institution (Davis, 2017). The criminalization of Black males is based in part on a process of acculturation into the prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2011). This acculturation comes through normalized contact with police and surveillance as Black children play in the street, gather in public spaces, ride around in cars, and go to schools with metal detectors and security cameras (Taylor et al., 2001). Schools with historically higher enrollments of Black students have had increased access to school resource officers or other security personnel (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). The presence of police who patrol schools and classrooms in uniforms with guns, pepper spray, and batons at their waist reinforces the criminalization of Black students instead of fostering academic engagement (Davis, 2017). Love (2016) suggested that "school practices and police officers are slowly killing Black children by murdering their spirits through intentional actions, physical assaults, and verbal stabbings" (p. 2). Continual examples reinforce Love's point, as everyday acts of anti-Black male violence criminalize Black youth who are arrested on and off school grounds (Porter, 2015).

Disproportionalities in Disciplinary Practices

In the U.S., Black males often spend more time in a disciplinary space (e.g., principal's office, dean's office, isolation, or alternative discipline setting) than in a classroom (Ferguson, 2001). Such disciplinary spaces become an extension of the school to prison pipeline, where judgment is passed about the students' future (Ferguson, 2001; Lewis et al., 2010). In her seminal study, Ferguson (2001) demonstrated how racialized narratives and stereotypes are internalized by school staff to think Black male students facing discipline are uncontrollable and bound for jail. Black males are thus viewed less like students and more as potential criminals (Hirschfield, 2008; Mowen, 2017; Simon, 2007).

White middle-class teachers occupy positions of power in educational settings, developing behavioral expectations based on their cultural norms, often misinterpreting and overreacting when Black males engage in normalized adolescent behaviors (Caton, 2012; Monroe, 2005; Rome, 2004). White teachers often work from within a hegemonic, Western, epistemological framework, which fosters negative racial ideologies towards Black students (Boykin, 1992). The overarching Whiteness of school curriculum further exacerbates the teacher-student social distance (Carnoy, 1974; Darder, 1991). This systemic lack of understanding Blackness affects personal interactions, as White teachers rely upon disciplinary procedures instead of cultural learning (Fitzgerald, 2015; Shaunessy & McHatton, 2009).

Numerous studies confirm Black male overrepresentation in suspensions and expulsions (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011). Black males are suspended three times more often than White peers (Skiba et al., 2002). One study reported that among 9,000 students, 35% had experienced at least one suspension (Shollenberger, 2015). Nearly 67% of Black males had been suspended, compared to 38% of White males (Shollenberger, 2015). Researchers also found that from 1995 to 2003, the chance of Black students being suspended increased, whereas the probability for White suspensions remained relatively stable (Krezmein et al., 2006).

Zero tolerance policies typically mandate predetermined punishments for minor infractions, often ending in racially disparate suspensions, expulsions, and referrals into the juvenile justice system (Archer, 2009; Dancy, 2014; Durr & Brown, 2016). The phrase zero tolerance was first used to combat federal drug seizure policies (e.g., the war on drugs) in the 1980s (Skiba & Knesting, 2001). In the 1990s, ostensibly to reduce school and youth violence, districts began implementing zero tolerance policies to deter manufactured threats to school safety (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Heitzeg, 2009). Yet such rigid disciplinary policies exacerbate racial disparities in out-of-school suspensions among Black male students (Bottiani et al., 2017; Solórzano et al., 2002). This exclusion is tied to higher unemployment, poverty, and incarceration rates (Bound & Freeman, 1992), intentionally maintaining societal racial hierarchies, and excluding Black students from participating in higher education (Harper et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2010).

While Black students make up just 15% of the U.S. school population, 35% of all suspended students are Black. Worse, more than 50% of Black students who are suspended were involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Researchers have demonstrated that this racial disproportionality exists in rural, suburban, and urban schools, largely unaffected by state boundaries (Smith & Harper, 2015). While some data suggests higher overall rates of suspensions in rural communities (versus suburban or urban), racial disproportionalities remain regardless of region (Romney & Willis, 2019). Across California, for example, many schools suspended Black students are more than double the rate of White students, regardless of geography (Romney & Willis, 2019). These disproportionalities exist across decades, seemingly unimpacted by various measures and approaches (Losen et al., 2015). Although some researchers have found differences in behavioral issues between Black and White students (Hosterman et al., 2008), when Black males are accused of the same offense, Black males typically receive harsher punishment than White counterparts (Lewis et al., 2010). Underlying these disparities rests societal fear of Black males and a false linkage to violence often conducted by White, not Black, men (Noguera, 2008; Triplett et al., 2014).

Although mandated rules targeting Blackness play a role in who gets suspended, contributing factors include administrator attitudes towards discipline (Skiba et al., 2015). Black male students are also more likely to be disciplined for minor offenses that rely on the judgment of teachers and administrators, like disrespect towards educators (Skiba et al., 2002). Other minor offenses include not having proper school supplies, tardiness, and truancy (Fitzgerald, 2015; Morrison & D'Incau, 1997). White teachers regularly interpret Black students' behaviors as inappropriate (e.g., overlapping speech as disrespect, play fighting as authentic aggression, and humor as valid insults) when the actions are not intended to be so (Monroe, 2005; Weinstein et al., 2004). These infractions are common justifications for removing Black males from classrooms (Monroe, 2005), adversely impacting psychological, mental, physical, and economic well-being (Epp & Watkinson, 2005).

In-School Disciplinary Measures

In response to disparities in disciplinary outcomes for Black students compared to White counterparts, schools began using alternative approaches to one-size-fits-all disciplinary policies. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), often referred to as a focus on the Whole Child, are touted as evidence-based frameworks used to provide school personnel with skills in student behavior support (Gregory et al., 2016). While widespread across schools, districts, and states, PBIS is ultimately challenged as inadequate in addressing racialized traumas or reducing the policing of Black students (Wade & Ortiz, 2016). The model often follows a three-tiered prevention framework (Bradshaw et al., 2012) that focuses on classroom management for disruptive students, which avoids addressing racial biases and cultural clashes that drive discipline disparities (Welsh & Little, 2018).

PBIS is ultimately based on reinforcing positive behavioral assimilation by using targeting mechanisms that include, but do not disrupt, teacher perceptions and bias, teacher-student relationships, and classroom management (González, 2015). Perhaps most relevantly, while PBIS implementation may lead to decreases in disciplinary disproportionalities such as suspensions, the focus on transforming from racially traumatizing schools within racially hostile societies is absent (Vincent & Tobin, 2011; Wade & Ortiz, 2016). The end goal is to acculturate Black students, thereby increasing control over Black male behavior under a Whiteness framed definition of what behavior in schools should look like (Feagin, 2013; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Another approach to mediate racial disproportionality in discipline, and in particular, as a challenge to zero tolerance policies, has been the implementation of restorative justice programs (Fronius et al., 2016). Just as there have been many variations of PBIS, restorative justice frameworks have been implemented in various manners to drastically different effects (Daneshzadeh & Sirrakos, 2018). The underlying theory ultimately is that restorative practices provide a holistic engagement with youth who may have committed an infraction or deviated from a school's behavioral expectations, potentially including behaviors that previously would otherwise have been criminalized (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005). Rather than approach from a punishment lens, restorative justice aims to "cultivate a mutualistic understanding" of infractions within historical contexts and values that limit Black youth participation in schools (Daneshzadeh & Sirrakos, 2018, p. 17). Thus, while in theory, schools using restorative justice transform disciplinary procedures towards a student-centric, race-forward communal process, implementation is based upon the same foundation of school Whiteness. At their core, such restorative processes still individualize behavior as problematic, aiming to return the victim and/or perpetrators to the norms of White classrooms.

School disciplinary practices continue to exclude Black students, in part because disciplinary reforms largely cater to the needs and norms of White dominant culture, maintaining anti-Blackness (Cramer et al., 2014). The outcome of PBIS and restorative justice, like zero tolerance practices before them, still normalize racism in ways that maintain White control over Black male behavior (Feagin, 2013; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Guiding Critical Race Theory Tenets

This study centered Black male student voices as a way to counter the Whiteness of policies and practices designed to police Black male behavior. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was used as an analytical tool to transform "the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 3) and guide this study's prioritization of Black male voices.

While CRT literature includes a number of tenets that challenge the dynamics of racism, most CRT frameworks typically consist of five tenets: (1) the permanence of racism; (2) counter-storytelling; (3) interest convergence; (4) Whiteness as property; and (5) a critique of liberalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Zamudio et al., 2011). Though all are relevant to clarifying the experiences of Black male students, three tenets were used to frame this study: (1) the permanence of racism; (2) counter-storytelling; and (3) interest convergence.

These tenets provide a foundation for understanding why Black male students are suspended through clarifying systemic interest in silencing Blackness. The permanence of racism tenet is based on the idea that racism is always present in every social configuring in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, for example, continue to be excluded from housing, economic systems, higher paid jobs, and career pathways, and access healthcare at disproportionately lower rates (Zamudio et al., 2011). Similarly, the U.S. maintains its historical foundation in creating such racialized barriers through contemporary policies and practices that are designed to maintain and enhance White dominance (Bell, 1998; Gillborn, 2013). The White racial frame has further led public education policies to rely on false conceptions of color blindness, essentially celebrating past civil rights wins while denying ongoing racism (Gooden, 2012). CRT sees schools as fostering this permanence through justifying racism, enacting inequalities, and rewarding cultural acquiescence (Knaus, 2018).

The second CRT tenet used to frame this study is counter-storytelling, which CRT defines as exposing "the contradictions inherent in the dominant storyline that, among other things, blames people of color for their own condition of inequality" (Zamudio, et al., 2011, p. 5). Counter-stories become strategies for individuals of color to communicate racialized experiences that challenge mainstream thinking (Delgado et al., 2017; Solórzano & Yosso 2002). While majoritarian stories draw on the implicit knowledge of the dominant group, they also distort and silence the experiences of people of color, and in particular, Black males (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT-based research is thus a "commitment to centering the voices of those who are silenced and excluded by structural racism," (Knaus, 2014, p. 165). The use of counter-storytelling in this study challenges policy climates that silence Black male voices, arguing that any conversations about discipline must highlight Black male experiences, as well as other students of color.

The third tenet used to frame this study is the notion of interest convergence, which conceptualizes policies and practices as advancing the interests of communities of color only when also promoting continued White domination (Castagno & Lee, 2007; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Donnor, 2005). While Bell (1998; 2004) clarified many policy examples of interest convergence (emancipation, civil rights acts, affirmative action), he focused extensively on the *Brown* decision as a particularly nefarious example. The *Brown* decision was framed as racial advancement in education due to the Supreme Court declaring that segregated schooling was unconstitutional (Zamudio et al., 2011). This decision, however, was justified by the global need for the U.S. to address its civil rights record specifically with regard to anti-Blackness (Bell, 2004). While Whites lost the legal opportunity to maintain White-only public schools, they maintained their social status through within-school and within-classroom tracking, race-based standardized assessments, and racially disparate disciplinary practices to remove Black children from schools (Browne-Marshall, 2019). These school-based practices built upon regional planning efforts as Whites fled urban communities, created suburbs, and developed their own school systems (Noguera, 2003). Jay (2003) argues that since desegregation, "institutions and

schools, through their organization, structure, and curriculum (both formal and hidden), have aided in the maintenance of White hegemony" (p.7).

These three tenets shape the purpose and focus of this study, including framing the cause of disproportionality (racism), prioritizing interviews with Black male students about their experiences, rather than teacher-focused perceptions (counter-storytelling), and challenging solutions to disproportionality as maintaining White interest in removing Black students from schools (or remediating Black behavior).

Research Design

This study was based upon two focus groups and nine individual interviews with Black male students who were suspended or expelled during the 2017-2018 year in what is referred to here as the Winfield School District (WSD). Situated in the Pacific Northwest, WSD is a suburban district that serves approximately 15,000 predominantly White students. Interviews were based on a CRT-informed methodological approach that suggested creating safe spaces for Black male students to share their experiences as an essential part of study procedures (Knaus, 2014). The first author conducted two hour-long focus groups and nine 30-45-minute individual interviews to clarify the experiences of Black males who have been suspended. Guiding research questions included examining if previously suspended Black male students think they were being funneled into the school to prison pipeline and how this funneling impacts their academic trajectory.

Sampling Procedures

The first author sorted through a district-provided list of 150 Black male students who were suspended or expelled multiple times during the 2017-2018 school year. The initial list was limited to Black males between the ages of 14 and 18 enrolled at one of three WSD high schools. Ten students out of the initial 150 were randomly selected (Miles et al., 2014) and invited to participate via email. Most students were already familiar with the lead author, who at the time of the study served as an advisor and one of the only Black male educators in the district. After nine agreed to participate, students signed consent forms (with those under 18 also providing signed parental consent forms). All students self-identified as African and American or African American, though all also identified as "Black." Thus, this paper uses "Black" as a term that includes African and American as well as African American.

Data Collection

In applying CRT to methods, the lead author shared counter-stories with participants, honoring a tradition of Black storytelling as therapy, sharing experiences of oppression in schools while modeling healing and liberation strategies for participants (Delgado, 1989; Knaus, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). This process of centering Black voices was essential to foster camaraderie and to help students think of research as a relational process (Patel, 2016). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted first, in which students were asked to share experiences leading to suspensions, thoughts while suspended, and their return to the classroom. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and scanned for initial themes to inform focus groups.

Focus groups were intended to solicit more experiences and to help participants recognize that they all experienced policies and practices that targeted their existence as Black males. Focus group interviews narrowed in on disciplinary experiences, the cumulative impact of school suspensions, racialized experiences, and interactions with the criminal justice system. The lead

author traveled to three high schools to interview participants. In the high school where the researcher did not work, individual interviews took place in a vacant office. In the high school where the researcher was based, individual interviews took place in the researcher's office. The lead author used a high school conference room for all focus group interviews.

Data Analysis

While initial data analysis consisted of thematic scans from individual interviews, a full thematic analysis was conducted with transcripts from the two focus groups, with a secondary analysis of individual interview data (Miles et al., 2014). The lead author compiled data sets, obscured identifying information (including references to schools, educators, students, families, and geography), and assigned pseudonyms. Themes were then coded, followed by a tertiary analysis to validate each theme; these were in turn checked by participants. From these themes, representative quotations were extracted to honor participant voices.

Participants

Participants were excited to finally have a safe space to talk about racism and specific incidents that led to their suspensions. Participant ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old, and from 9th grade to 12th grade. Most identified as African American, though two (Matthew, born in Sudan, and Mark, born in Guinea), identified as African and American. While all had been suspended multiple times, two had been previously incarcerated (see Table 1).

Table 1. Study Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Grade	Race[1]	Suspended[2]	Expelled	Incarcerated
Jason	15	10th	African American	15	1	Yes
Matthew	17	12th	African and American	2	0	No
Andrew	17	11th	African American	5	0	No
Mark	17	11th	African and American	10	0	No
Luke	15	9th	African American	3	1	Yes
John	17	10th	African American	3	0	No
James	18	12th	African American	8	0	No
Job	16	10th	African American	2	0	No
Nathan	15	9th	African American	4	0	No

Findings

Across each interview and focus group, participants were painfully aware of systemic racism, of racially biased treatment from teachers and administrators, and saw schools as anti-Black. Most attributed this racism to a latent desire to remove them from classrooms and

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[1] Self-identified racial identity.

[2] Includes in-school and out-of-school suspensions.

schools. Interviews were conducted prior to the explosion of local cases of police brutality, yet these men knew that they were trying to survive anti-Blackness. As Andrew clarified, "White people do not want to see me win, and they just want to discriminate because they think that they are better than Black people. White people own everything and want Black people locked up, starting in preschool." This recognition flowed across the interviews, as these young Black men spoke to the systemic racism that limits their educational journeys.

Suspensions to Silence

All students began by clarifying how they were unable to share their perspectives on whatever infractions they were being accused of. Students expressed anger and frustration because they did not agree with why they were suspended and because they had no voice in formal disciplinary processes. The lack of student advocacy reinforced the racism they felt, as they saw non-Black students getting away with similar charges (charges which many students denied doing in the first place). Formal justifications for suspensions included minor infractions like play fighting and being tardy. Underneath district rationales for suspension were policies that ignored student perspectives.

Jason reflected on the normalization of Black silencing: "I told the principal what happened, but they don't ever listen to a student side that gets in trouble." Mark similarly noted that non-Black student voices mattered, whereas nothing he could say would be heard: Before the principals gave me my consequence for fighting, I tried to explain myself, but I would always get cut off. It made me feel like there's no point in me even coming to school. No matter what you do, no matter how little it is, and let's say if you're arguing or somebody from a different race comes and tells them what you've done, you're going to get in trouble. There's no way to get out of your suspension, no way. Every time I've gotten suspended or I was going to get suspended, the administration never really even thought about, 'Oh, maybe he's right.' When I explain myself, I've always just gotten suspended.

In addition to not being asked why he was late to school or having his circumstance considered, John was suspended because of transportation barriers outside of his control. I asked my principal and the Dean of Students, 'Why am I being suspended?' and they told me it's for showing up to school late. I just moved here and didn't have reliable transportation to get to school, so the time I would get here would vary. But at the latest, I would only be like 10 minutes late to class. I was given an in-school suspension.

Luke shared similar frustrations in a focus group, arguing that he was treated unfairly after play fighting with friends: A couple of friends and I were joking around, and we were play fighting. However, out of all the people play fighting, a teacher picks me out to send me to the office because I was hitting my friends hard. They later suspended me for roughhousing. I felt like I was being treated unfairly because we were all doing it. The principals did not give me a chance to say anything. They just skipped straight to suspending me.

Luke's experience prompted Matthew to talk about an MLK day assembly. Matthew shared that during the assembly, the Black Student Union (BSU) sang the Black national anthem. During the song, a White teacher scolded Black students who were standing up during the anthem. Matthew stopped himself from responding to the teacher because he felt like he would be suspended again. Andrew then responded directly to Matthew: "Fuck being respectful; you got to press people like that, bro. It doesn't matter, what are they going to do to you? Suspend you for a

couple of days?" Matthew's hesitation was based on his experience seeing Black male students get suspended for standing up for themselves: "They going to make a big ass scene, and that's going to reflect on me. The White teachers who I stand up against might go behind my back and tell other teachers that I'm a bad student."

Andrew continued to argue that standing up for yourself is more important than grades. Andrew kept pushing: "You're worried about your grades, but it's an assembly on Martin Luther King bro. The nigga who stood for Black people. You going to let a White man talk about him like that?" Matthew, mindful of his academic pursuits, reframed standing up to a White teacher within a context of punishment, recognizing that, "If I say something, the consequence is going to reflect on me too."

As Andrew and Matthew continued to engage back and forth on how to handle racism and standing up for themselves while weighing the chance of getting suspended, Mark joined in: "Any of these teachers can suspend him just like that. They can say whatever and get him suspended. You should've also stood up." While the discussion was collegial, Matthew was frustrated:

> This should tell you that we have no option. We can't do nothing. If we say something bad, we are going to get in trouble. We're scared to speak up because of the consequences we will get.

Though expressed in a separate interview, Nathan echoed Matthew's point: "I can't fight the school system by myself. So, a lot of times, I just don't want to be here." Nathan reflected the hopelessness that punishments for speaking out cause, choosing to disengage rather than challenge teacher racism. John argued that putting up with school silencing was the only option:

> That's why I don't want to go to school [here]. But my mom wants me to. I don't want to put a burden on my mom and have her drive me to another school district. That's mileage. So, I try to get through not wanting to be at Winfield schools for her.

The result of being treated unfairly led participants to not want to come to school, and to not challenge when they see racism. Being suspended was just one part of the racism they faced, and all agreed that interacting with most White teachers left them feeling hopeless and angry, all of which impacted their learning. Already concerned about barely tolerating the everyday racism of their teachers, school suspensions heightened that impact. Matthew stated directly: "When I got suspended, I almost dropped out of school. I almost gave up on school."

> Mark described his suspensions, similarly stating: "I almost dropped out." He continued:
> When I was getting suspended multiple times, it would come to a point where I just would say nothing. I'd just let them say whatever and I'd be like 'Ok, just take me home.' Cause whatever I'd say would not matter, in any way. I already got kicked off the basketball team.

Mark clarified that there were increasing punishments from his behavior, and that the withdrawal of his participation in the few activities he was interested in had a cumulative effect of disengagement. Nathan shared a similar pattern, where access to peers and social engagements were seen as privileges to be taken away:

> They took my bathroom privileges away so that I cannot go to the bathroom during class. Since the guy I fought and I had the same lunch, the school made me eat lunch in a classroom for two weeks so that we wouldn't be together. I couldn't be in the cafeteria at all for two weeks. I can't walk to the bathroom by myself! My teacher has to call a person or one of my teachers to walk me down to the bathroom and wait until I come out.

As WSD enacted zero tolerance policies, the district also criminalized these students for minor infractions, something students saw as the district building up cases to suspend them later. Participants shared experiences about how school personnel continuously suspended them for longer days than the infraction suggested. Once a student is in trouble, students recognized, they are continuously targeted. Andrew summarized this pattern: "School is just like a prison. You get in trouble once; you will continue to get into trouble. You are going to end up in jail." Matthew extended Andrew's frustration:

> If you get suspended for five days and return to school for two days and you get suspended again for another ten days, you automatically behind. Once you fall behind, that will not give you the motivation to come to school, and then you going to drop out. I know people who have dropped out for being suspended because they just gave up. Like catching up on grades and stuff is hard, and the teachers are not even going to help you.

James talked about the long-term effects of being away from school, and how that had a progressively negative impact on his academic engagement. "I just sit at home, play video games, and maybe do work," James lamented, "Sleep all day, and clean the house." Nathan similarly talked about helping out at home, then argued how suspensions interrupt learning:

> I feel like it's unfair because the school system is taking away our rights to learn. Just because we have a computer doesn't mean I know what I'm doing or how to do the work. That's the whole reason teachers exist. You've sent me home, I haven't been taught anything in the past 3-4 days, and they still expect me to do the work. How? I don't do anything for school when I'm suspended, because I don't know any of it.

The lack of teacher support while at home led to suspensions feeling like intentional exclusion from society. John described the process as one of isolation: "I just sit in my house and think about life. My mom is at work, and my siblings are at school, so there's no one to talk to until my mom gets home." Jason affirmed the lack of engaging academically while being suspended, arguing that being at home is a waste of time: "I didn't do anything. My mom didn't even care."

James argued that he was trying to engage academically, but that suspension was not designed for him to be a student. "I had to catch up on a lot," he argued, "My science class did like 3-4 projects that week, and I had 2-3 homework assignments due in my other classes. Plus, whatever work my classes were currently doing." He later reflected that the "whole experience just sucked." Missing school and not having teacher support caused him to stay another year: "I ended up having some trouble getting all my credits and wasn't able to graduate on time, so I'm a super senior right now."

As participants clarified, suspensions were unfair, often for minor infractions, and rarely enabled students to clarify their perspectives. Unable to engage in due process and kept from teacher support, most students disengaged, dismissing the disciplinary process as racially biased and exclusionary. This led them to silence their voices as academic engagement decreased.

Anti-Black Educators

While students saw disciplinary measures as targeting them in unfair ways, they saw the lack of due process and fair treatment as a direct outcome of teacher and administrator racism. Most participants shared stories about how their teachers treated them like troublemakers before they had done anything wrong, and all experienced overt White teacher racism. Students told stories about teachers and administrators in their schools not caring, being judgmental, lacking cultural awareness and generally just not being supportive. Matthew clarified this sentiment succinctly: "Some teachers just don't care."

Mark illustrated what felt like a lack of care:

They try to use the suspension against me…if I'm in class they'll say, 'If you don't do what you're supposed to do, you will get in trouble like you did before.' They would just always bring it up as a warning. They don't ever talk to me about getting back on the right track and doing what I should do or forget about what I've done in the past.

Matthew added that "Some [teachers] just thought I got suspended because I was being a bad kid and that it was my fault." Job observed other Black students being dismissed by White teachers, recalling that "If a Black kid comes and asks for help, they don't know what to do and then don't do anything at all." "To be honest," Job argued, "I don't think they know how to deal with Black kids in general. They've never had that experience before."

The lack of care was reinforced by teacher apathy towards racist peers. James shared that "In an all-White school with all-White students, you hear the n-word all the time coming from people's mouths." Asked how he responded when he heard that, James stated, "You can't do anything about it because then you 'took action' and now you got in trouble. Teachers say, 'Oh, I hear the word,' but don't do anything about it." The dismissal of anti-Black racism from teachers and students was compounded by the fear of teacher retribution. All participants shared similar stories of teachers either actively or passively enabling anti-Black racism. The frustration at not being able to challenge this made the students angry.

Andrew described his experience with racism in relation to doing the same offense but getting harsher punishment: "The White kids do something similar to what the Black kids did, but they don't get in trouble for it. But the Black kids do and then we get hit on the hand harder." Andrew continued: "When I got suspended for fighting, the White kid that I fought didn't get suspended. One of them got in-school [suspension], but I got three days." Job added that "When Black people get in trouble, we're targeted and get the worst of the punishments. But when White people get in trouble, they just get a slap on the wrist and get off. Nothing bad happens to them." Mark named anti-Black racism as the cause of these disparities: "The reason why they punish Black males harsher is from my experience is because they are racist." Luke agreed, arguing that "everybody already knows that the race issue is a non-stopping problem." Jason added: "One of the people that go here actually told me that one of the counselors told them that the school is better if Black people were not here because they were causing trouble." Jason's second-hand quote reinforced what these students all felt: that school personnel did not want them on campus.

Mark shared another experience with a White teacher. As many were taking a knee during the pledge of allegiance across the U.S., Mark showed his solidarity and did not stand during the in-class pledge. The teacher asked him: "Would you rather stay where you're from than be in America?" Mark recalled "that's how I knew like…people are racist." Mark was still concerned about not getting punished, reflecting that, "I'm not going to do anything that's going to get me in trouble, but I told the Dean of Students, and nothing happened. The teacher still works here." Every other participant had heard similar anti-Black statements from teachers.

Nathan described his experience with racist teachers using their White privilege in ways to show authority: "I guess we're known as troublemakers. And ever since I been labeled, it feels like the school been watching everything I do. Teachers and admin act upper class and feel like they have higher authority because they're adults and they're White." Jason continued Nathan's point: "I do think I'm always being watched. My mom tells me that all the time."

In the same focus group, John shared his thoughts regarding anti-Black racism and punishment as something he just accepts because he knows this is normalized in schools:

Principals try to say something in a way that it doesn't sound bad, but deep down I think they don't like us. I'm not just going to say everybody, but there are people here I can tell don't like us. That's why when I get in trouble I don't even try talking or explaining myself. I just accept that it is what it is.

These quotes represent experiences being presumed guilty. Andrew felt like he is continually being watched by teachers: "Because once you get in trouble, you do it again, they're already on your back. It's like a target. Any problem that happens in the school, they're going to question you." Matthew then responded directly to Andrew: "Honestly, that is true because, like if you have done something in the past, it will go down on your record, and it will affect you, and every teacher can see that." Mark then echoed Matthew: "They keep reminding me about what I have done. They'll try to use that as motivation to suspend me." Mark continued:

"They be trying to target. They be trying to get you, bro. They try to get you for nothing. One of the teachers asked me, and they were like, 'Do you want to be in jail, or do you want to be in school?' I was like, 'What kind of question is that?' They were like, 'If you keep going down this path, you are going to end up in jail.'

Under constant threat of proactive disciplinary practices inside and outside the classroom, these young men felt neither safe nor protected at school. All students shared repeated stories of being treated unfairly by racist teachers and administrators and saw how suspensions led to interactions with the criminal justice system. Even when students showed evidence that they did not commit an infraction, they were suspended (and in some cases, sent to jail). These experiences reflect an anti-Black male framework of discipline, fostered by teachers and administrators who do not appear to fundamentally care for, much less nurture, these Black male students.

Limitations

While this research project was limited to student voice, future related research should engage parent and teacher perspectives on punishments and school suspensions to provide a fuller understanding of experiences and impacts. This study focused on Black male students being removed from the classroom, and most often, this removal was from White educators. Future research should also examine impacts of the presence of Black teachers, as qualitative research suggests teachers of color and Black teachers may reduce the likelihood of being suspended or expelled (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020). Additionally, student participants had been suspended multiple times; future research could engage students at the time of their first suspension to gain an understanding of immediate impact. Relatedly, as the focus was on student voice, data were not collected across this specific school district, in relation to other students of color, or alternatives to suspensions. Thus, while engaging a small set of Black male students who had been multiply suspended can illuminate practice and impacts, larger, more systemic analyses are required to fully transform classroom, school, and district-wide practices. Despite these limitations, the authors hope this study will remind researchers of the importance of Black students, and in particular, of the dramatic need to address ongoing anti-Black practices common in schools across the U.S.

Discussion

These nine Black male students contrasted how their teachers painted them as troublemakers. All were interested in academics and in participating in disciplinary discussions to talk through what they were accused of. They also continually asked each other's perspectives, challenged each other in respectful ways, and thoughtfully observed and supported other Black students who were being treated unfairly. Yet all were similarly silenced, feeling that teachers and administrators simply did not want them at their school or within the district. Their experiences fostered frustration, leading directly to school disengagement, even as every student expressed wanting to learn more, to graduate, and many wanted to go onto college. Despite teacher racism, all wanted to earn a diploma because they wanted to make their families proud by graduating and getting a job and/or going to college after high school.

Returning to the CRT tenet of the permanence of racism, participants knew they were being intentionally funneled into the prison system. As they saw anti-Blackness in society, they also saw their teachers and administrators embracing racism, and knew that they had to navigate a racist system in order to be more successful in life. From being assaulted by White students saying the n-word, to teacher intentional ignoring of such verbal violence, participants named systemic racism seemingly designed to trigger them, to encourage them to react (and in turn, get suspended). This was exacerbated by incidents that happened where White students (and non-Black students of color) were given preferential treatment by their White educators. When students were suspended, they saw their time being wasted, and felt the same teacher apathy as they did while on campus, further reinforcing isolation. Upon their return, they felt further surveilled, with teachers seemingly hoping for them to mess up so they could be suspended again.

These systemic assaults reinforced the reality that these students had no way to address the many forms of racism their teachers fostered. Lacking structural supports and advocates, most students disengaged from their academic trajectories, unable to make up their work and falling further behind. As they increasingly failed, or struggled to barely pass, students felt decreasing interest in school at all, leading to decreased opportunities to attend college. Students saw these impacts as extending the racism they faced and were deeply aware that their White teachers did not want Black male students in their schools. Disciplinary procedures, then, were seen as a tool to enact racism, to build up cases to enable their physical removal from schools. Every mechanism to potentially engage was seen as a privilege afforded to those who did not have to face racism (White students), and these students increasingly saw schools as specifically designed to perpetuate racism at their expense.

The second tenet, that of voice and counter-storytelling, became relevant as these students identified disciplinary processes designed to silenced them. Even when allowed to share, their perspectives were dismissed in favor of White students. In short, these students recognized what their teachers intended for them: to be quiet or to not exist. When these students reminded their educators that they existed, they soon learned that speaking out about White racism or facing limited transportation options were things they could not react to, that they had to remain silent about. Rather than being encouraged to develop their voice, to stand up for themselves, and to raise concerns about racism, these students were punished, seemingly for reminding teachers that they were alive and facing racism. This silencing was systemic, intentional, and meant to remove their voices, their stories, and ultimately, their humanity.

Counter-stories as a research method thus became a healing space for these students, who were given just a glimpse into opportunities to share their experiences, perspectives, and feelings

in settings that they were not judged for, and that did not lead to punishments. As they participated in these interviews, they were in a safe space that did not attempt to modify their behavior, how they talked, or why they existed. They saw an educator who looked like them, who spoke as an advocate and mentor rather than as someone out to get them. This reinforced the importance of having educators of color who are culturally familiar with students on staff, engaging authentically with students who feel continually targeted on and off campus, as has been argued extensively elsewhere (Gay, 2010; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020).

Third tenet, interest convergence, was demonstrated across the interviews. While the focus of interviews did not engage specific policies or practices designed to address racial disproportionality, students did identify recurring teacher practices that seemed designed to remove Black students from their classrooms. This systemic removal was supported by school and district disciplinary policies that ostensibly were designed to maintain a learning environment for White students, ultimately leading to fewer Black students in classrooms. Since continual removal led to Black student disengagement, White teachers also spent less time with Black male students. Thus, disciplinary processes were based on silencing Black male voices, leading to academic disengagement, which was then seen by these students to be what White teachers wanted. The additional example of Black students not feeling comfortable standing up against what they perceived as White teacher racism at a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration suggests that the celebration was in the interests of Whites, who could argue they held an assembly and thus, could not be racist (all while silencing Black students at that very event).

In an era of Trayvon Martin, of continued state-sanctioned anti-Black violence, this particular school district paralleled a national approach that targets Black males for removal from society (often through assassination). In schools, racism and disciplinary procedures were seen as a similar approach to silence Black male students, remove those who still insisted on being seen or heard, and validate all of this under the guise of student behavior. As national efforts call to defund police and school resource officers, this study offers a compelling justification to, in turn, hire educators, counselors, and social workers who are willing and able to provide healing, love, and intellectual engagement with Black male students (Love, 2019). Some of these educators may be White, but the educational focus must shift from Whiteness as a teaching strategy, from silencing and removal, to Black affirmation and a commitment to challenge U.S. anti-Blackness.

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