Chapter 10

Black Girls Matter: An Intersectional Analysis of Young Black Women’s Experiences and Resistance to Dominating Forces in School

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The overuse of harsh discipline for Black and Latino students in the United States has received increased attention as the racial disparity in discipline rates is connected to negative outcomes for impacted students (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Losen, 2011). This attention, however, has often focused on the outcomes of Black male students, who are disproportionately represented through the schoolhouse to jailhouse pipeline (Morris, 2012), but largely ignores experiences of Black female students (Morris, 2016; Wun, 2014).

Young Black female students experience multiple and intersecting forms of oppression in schools – such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia – that can impede their academic success. For example, a recent report by Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda (2015) found that while Black male students are more frequently suspended than Black female students, Black female students were disproportionally suspended when compared to their White counterparts. While Black boys were suspended more than 3 times as often as White boys, whereas Black girls were suspended 6 times as often as White girls. Young women are also exposed to sexual harassment and violence, and more than 1 in 5 reported being sexually assaulted, with higher rates for LGBTQ populations. Women of color also face racial discrimination that includes being called racial slurs at much higher rates than White women (Chaudhry & Tucker, 2017).

As educational researchers with social justice orientations, we believe that centering experiences of Black girls in schools is a meaningful approach to understanding interlocking forms of oppression faced by students of color and facilitates interventions in schools that are comprehensive and inclusive (Davis, Brunn-Bevel, & Olive, 2015). As such, this chapter contributes to a growing body of research that attempts to understand how young Black women experience and resist measures of discrimination in both school and society. Open-ended interviews conducted with 6 Black women in South Florida helped to understand (a) intersectional challenges to educational attainment related to anti-Black racism, sexism, and classism and (b) repertoires of resistance to survive and persist in spite of challenging conditions.
1 Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality structures the main theoretical framework of this chapter, which is also infused with Black feminist theory to understand how the oppressive structures and cultures of anti-Black racism, class-based discrimination (classism) and sexism work as interlocking systems of domination in schools (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2011; Evans-Winters, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016; Wun, 2014). An intersectional analysis implores us to understand interlocking systems of domination as mutually reinforcing in order to avoid overly simplistic solutions that seek to address one symptom of the underlying issue rather than understand and undermine the root causes of the dominating systems themselves.

In the construction of Black gender ideology, low-income Black women are popularly portrayed and viewed as too strong, promiscuous, or aggressive (Collins, 2000). Attempts to surveil and regulate Black women’s bodies and expressions of femininity appear as part of a political project to reinforce systems of domination (Ocen, 2012). In schools, similar forms of regulation have been observed as Black female students are subjected to a variety of punitive disciplining practices.

Anti-Black racism has remained central to racial formation throughout U.S. history as myths of the lazy and criminal Black person persist and legitimize racist beliefs and policies (Collins, 2000; Dumas, 2016; Wun, 2014). Black people are currently the “paradigmatic objects of racialized state repression” (Wun, 2014, p. 4). Building on research that seeks to understand discriminatory structures through experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 2011; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Wun, 2014), this research helps inform our understanding of intersecting forms of oppression through the experiences of young Black women and their strategies for resistance.

2 Disparate Treatment of Black Girls

Black female students are often treated in punitive ways in schools by adults who do not know or understand the kinds of challenges and circumstances facing women of color (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Stereotypes about low-income Black women inform how they are treated by adults in schools, including those who expect girls to be docile and who view Black girls’ behaviors negatively as acts of defiance to dominant norms (Evans-Winters, 2005). Jones (2010) found that Black girls in Philadelphia navigated challenging and sometimes violent settings through a variety of strategies, while having to