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"It's Going to Go in One Ear and Out the Other": Black Girls Talk Back to Administrator Perceptions of Justice-Oriented School Discipline

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Abstract
This study offers the results of a Black feminist project in humanization designed to understand administrators' role in interrupting the over-disciplining of Black girls in urban public schools. Carried out with 5 Black girls on probation and 5 Black urban school leaders, the findings suggest that the approaches the administrators used to uplift social justice were not as useful to Black girls' educational experiences as they were assumed to be. In discussion, the paper attributes the disconnection between intent and reception to the competing demands administrators are subject to in a racialized neoliberal educational context.

Keywords Black girls · Urban education · Neoliberal · Social justice · Caring · School administrators

Introduction

The disparate rates at which Black girls experience punitive discipline demonstrates how schools systematically misunderstand and deny space for their racialized gender (Blake et al., 2011; Inniss-Thompson, 2017; Morris, 2016). Exclusionary discipline operates on the assumption that schooling should hold greater value in students' lives than most other needs and ignores the differential effects of the practice within and across student groups (Edwards, 2020). Students who experience this form of discipline are made vulnerable to a host of factors limiting educational opportunity—including contact with the juvenile justice system (Nocella et al., 2018). For Black girls, the risks associated with it are significant, as they are far more vulnerable to adverse life outcomes than their non-Black peers (Catalano, 2012; Dumas, 2016; Miller, 2008; Morris, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). However,

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school administrators stand at the crux of disciplinary experiences and healthful outcomes for Black youth because they hold wide discretionary power to determine and mete out punitive consequences (Findlay, 2015). Thus, there are opportunities for school principals to play a pivotal role in disrupting the discipline disparities Black girls face.

Administrators who use social justice leadership theory to guide their practice attempt to address these challenges by working in ways that are critically conscious of the social consequences of punitive discipline (Theoharis, 2007). They stress the importance of palpable care, support equitable decision-making in policy and practice, and are widely considered indispensable to the project of redressing injustice in schools (Shields, 2018). Given the potential administrators operating through this frame have to interrupt school-to-confinement processes, this study asked: How do school leaders perceive their role in Black girls' school/prison nexus experiences? By comparing the school discipline perspectives of five Black administrators to the school/prison nexus experiences of five Black girls, I argue that the social foundations of U.S. public schools limit school leaders' ability to care for and interrupt the adverse experiences Black girls have through exclusionary discipline.

Literature Review

Racialized Neoliberalism in the Social Milieu of Urban Schools

The challenges urban school leaders face is well-documented in the literature. They serve students with greater educational needs than their suburban counterparts, often in aging facilities that create barriers to teaching and learning in and of themselves (Aragon et al., 2013; Dancy, 2014; Howard & Milner, 2014; Irby, 2013). Popular discourse maintains them as persistent sites of failure, using the very term "urban" in racially coded ways to frame urban schools from a deficit perspective (O'Connor et al., 2014). Because popular urban educational discourse rarely attends to how racial formations (Omi & Winant, 2015) and systemic barriers maintain and reproduce educational disparities, society learns to perceive urban school challenges as problems of their own creation. These challenges are an outgrowth of antiblackness in the social organization of society (Dumas, 2016) and the racial capitalist foundations of schooling for Black children.

Given the historical centrality of exploiting Black bodies in the U.S. economy, it served the interests of wealthy white industrialists to establish and maintain a racially bifurcated educational system during the Reconstruction period (Pierce, 2017). This move has proven to solidify racial stratification in U.S. schooling—with Black and non-white children experiencing disproportionately fewer educational opportunities than their white counterparts into the present day. These outcomes are further complicated by intersectional domination, as biased notions of racialized gender function to limit Black girls' social experiences in ways that compound these effects (Crenshaw, 1989).

Today's neoliberal educational policies perpetuate these historical workings (Pierce, 2017; Rhee, 2013). School systems are incentivized to transfer power from

public to private sectors on the assumption that infusing systems with free-market values will foster achievements to serve the interests of the corporate class. As education professionals infuse school systems with entrepreneurialism and a host of profit generating practices to "turn-around" schools and students, the socio-historical patterning of educational neglect through inadequate funding, resource allocation, and curricula are left unaddressed (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite these factors, urban school leaders are left unsupported by a network of local, state, and federal policies placing the onus on principals, teachers, and students to rectify the challenges created by these racist and hetero-patriarchal foundations.

Rhee (2013) called these technologies of governmentality "neoliberal racial projects" (NRP); showing that neoliberal education reform is premised upon problematic racialized discourses compelling individuals to govern themselves. They write:

Power-knowledge relations shape the production of current discourse about race and.

> racism; this discourse is then mobilized in how we are governed and govern ourselves and others as neoliberal racial subjects in everyday life. Namely, neoliberal racialization is "common sense." Therefore, articulating the NRP involves examining how we "notice" (or fail to notice) race at the level of everyday life as common sense. (p. 563).

In urban schools, the NRP looks like a host of anxieties that are marketed to educational leaders as moral, ethical, and civil rights imperatives. Functioning on rhetoric that characterizes urban public schools as inefficient and ineffective, the NRP coopts the language and aesthetics of social justice to stir a sense of urgency that advancing privatized solutions is in the best interest of urban Black youth (Dumas, 2013). In so doing, it frames urban public schools from a damage-centered perspective as more attention is paid to what they lack than the structures upholding historical patterns of domination (Baldridge, 2017). Baldridge (2017) asserts that these workings position educational leaders, Black males in particular, in paternalistic relationships with their students. Black students are pathologized as "broken" in the NRP, and as so, their school leaders are thrust into roles that require them to prioritize neoliberal imperatives over Black students' humanity.

This study wondered how school leaders were contending with these logics in their relationships with Black girls in chronic disciplinary patterns. Theorists hold that a social justice orientation to school leader practice may redress, in whole or part, the intersectional oppressions minoritized youth face in schools (DeMatthews et al., 2015; Theoharris, 2007). This study wondered, however, the degree to which school administrators can be socially just given the NRP.

Black Girls and the School/Prison Nexus

Black girls' educational experiences play out in the intersections of multiple and overlapping points of privilege and oppression (Collins, 2000). For example, Black girls are often penalized for the very characteristics associated with exemplary educational achievement. Studies have characterized Black girls as assertive, curious,

independent, and resilient (Brown, 2013; Evans-Winters, 2011; Morris, 2016). Yet others have demonstrated how educators misperceive these attitudes as defiance and disrespect (Blake et al., 2011)—both subjective labels that are among the root causes of Black students' over-representation in exclusionary discipline (Welsh & Little, 2018).

It is critical to note that Black girls are among the most vulnerable in U.S. society (Centers for Disease Control, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013; U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). They face a number of social problems at disproportionately higher rates than their non-Black counterparts. Schools, however, rarely consider or account for the fatigue associated with these challenges when it plays out in schools (Morris, 2016). In fact, Black girls are held to higher standards of white supremacist and hetero-patriarchal "lady-like" comportment—even in the face of social circumstances that are difficult for adults to overcome (Epstein et al., 2017). Their skin color, hair styles, behavior, and speech are scrutinized just as acutely as (if not more than) their academic performance (Battle, 2017; Blake, 2017; Jones, 2009). Given these realities, understanding how Black girls are perceived by adults who hold criminalizing power over them is a critical issue in Black girlhood studies (Welsh & Little, 2018). Further, the literature establishes that analyzing these perceptions require educational researchers to be attendant to the complexities associated with school leaders' work in the neoliberal urban school context. These imperatives invite educational researchers to identify and analyze the differences between discursive and institutional commitments school leaders make to Black girls' educational success.

Who I Am and Why I Write

I write as a cis-gendered Black woman, educational researcher, teacher, positive youth development worker, and youth-organizer committed to Black girl worldmaking (Brown, 2013; Edwards et al., 2016; McArthur & Lane, 2019). Though I never experienced exclusion from school, my background as a youth development worker immersed me in the experiences of Black girls who navigate the juvenile court system. My interest in this topic emerged from my professional work as an educational advocate, where I was responsible for supporting young adults with school re-entry following incarceration. My first-hand experiences with the many systemic barriers to educational opportunity for formerly incarcerated youth brought me to consider this work as a topic for educational research.

I spent time with the girls who participated in this study over a 9-month period. My experience encouraged me to center their humanity in my conversations with school leaders. To do this, I sought the administrators' experiences with policies and practices that are central to leading Black girls instead of working in ways that confirmed their stories. I wanted to resist the temptation to pathologize Black girls by asking the adults who hold considerable power in their lives to validate their truths (Brown, 2013). My professional experience also played a role in my interpretation of their interview data as I was aware that school leaders are situated in the intersections of multiple policies, practices, and relationships shading their approach to

discipline. For this reason, I was inclined to hold as much regard for their unique standpoint as that of the girls.

Theoretical Frame

This study used Black feminist theory as its guiding analytic. Urban Black girls caught in the school/prison nexus and their school leaders experience a liminal status requiring that research with them be sensitive to complexity. The girls, living the experience between "free" and "incarcerated" were vulnerable to policies and perceptions that could exacerbate the negative effects of contact with the juvenile courts. Also "betwixt and between," the administrators navigated the space between the NRP, their relationships with Black girls, their commitments to social justice, and their own intersectional identities.

Given both groups' positionalities, it was important for this study to use an analytical device that was attendant to multiple and overlapping points of privilege and oppression. Black feminism articulates how social domination plays out in the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other social identities. In so doing, it makes clear the differential effects of power relations in Black girls' experiences (Collins, 2000). The frame is commonly invoked when a line of inquiry obscures needs through an over-emphasis on single-axis social analysis; that is, focusing on race or class or gender, etc. alone (Crenshaw, 1989).

Additionally, Black feminist theory holds that Black girls' experiences are a legitimate source of knowledge and that we locate demands for intersectional justice within them (Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2012; Evans-Winters et al., 2018). By foregrounding Black girls' experiences, the study created conditions for them to safely "talk back" to the perceptions, policies, and practices limiting their opportunities (hooks, 2015). This is an important move, given that Black girls are stereotyped and punished for using their voices, especially when doing so challenges school authorities. This reality is rooted in the historical propensity to undervalue and ignore Black women and girls' speech, even when our talking can affect community change (hooks, 2015). For these reasons, the study intentionally juxtaposed Black girls' and school leaders' perceptions to ensure that Black girls' voices are heard and amplified in our efforts to understand and resist their school-based criminalization.

Research Design

Study Context & Participants

This study was conducted in a major urban metropolitan area in a Southeastern state. The girls were committed to a county juvenile court system and were on probation when the study began. They attended schools in the county's urban center and a neighboring urban emergent context; and were recruited from a community-based program providing legal services and other social supports to court-involved girls.

The girls whose stories were centered in this research: Julia, Ayanna, Emily, Isis, and Ti–Ti, (participant chosen pseudonyms) identified as cis-gendered Black-American girls. They described themselves in the following ways:

> I'm Julia. I'm a aries. I like to shop, go out. I just can't sit in no house. I will be dead! I get my nails done. I'm not a people person like that, but I like to have fun. I have a daughter, Princess, she 8 weeks old. People say I'm bipolar because I get mad one minute and then be happy. But, I'm spoiled by my Dad because I'm a daddy's girl. Really, I'ma good girl, but people don't always see me like that.
>
> My name Ayanna. I'm 15. I like art and I like making stuff. I like to cook. I like animals. I like to clean up. I like to read. I'm funny! I smile a lot. I like everything to be right and correct because if I let somebody see it or let somebody know what I'm doing, they might laugh at it. I've been bullied a lot, so I don't like bullies. I don't like people talking about other people and I will always defend myself. That's why I get in trouble a lot, because I defend myself.
>
> I'm Emily. I work at McDonald's. I do everything there. I cook the food, I make the food. I take the orders. I clean up. I count the money – put the money in the safe – do deposits and all that stuff. It's a big responsibility. People always tell me I'm a leader.
>
> I'm Isis. I'm funny, kinda shy sometimes till I get open and I'm very polite. I like to run. I play soccer. I play the violin and I like working at my job.
>
> Well, my name is Ti-Ti. I used to play a lot of sports but I don't much anymore. I really don't like to gossip because that doesn't entertain me or nothing…It's like, I get better along with boys because they like to play sports and stuff, too. I'm just mainly, like, a tom-boyish.

From their self-descriptions, the girls identified as fun-loving, brave, creative, athletic, and responsible mothers, daughters, and sisters. They also self-identified as cis-gendered, ranged in age from 15 to 18 and were in grades 8 through 12. At the start of the study, Isis and Ti–Ti were enrolled in disciplinary alternative education programs, Emily completed her General Equivalency Diploma, and Ayanna and Julia were attending traditional public high schools. Most were of the working-class and had experienced periods of significant social and economic distress (i.e., unhoused experiences or kinship care). They were all on probation for school-based infractions but had differing punishment referral histories. Most had multiple experiences with suspension, a couple had experienced expulsion, and one experienced school-based arrest and youth incarceration (See Table 1).

The administrators were recruited from middle and high schools within the same school districts where the girls experienced chronic disciplinary patterns. They were pursued for recruitment after the girls were interviewed and preliminary findings indicated that school leaders were central to their school/prison nexus experience. School leader requirements for participation were that they were employed as an administrator in the school districts where Julia, Ayana, Emily, Isis, or Ti–Ti experienced trouble, that they held power to assign exclusionary discipline, and that they serve at the middle or high school level (because most of the girls' infraction

Table 1 Youth participant demographics

Participant	Age	Grade & District Type	Class Background	Legal Status	Suspensions	Expulsions	School Arrests	Incarceration
Julia	15	9 Urban	Working (Unhoused)	Probation	Chronic	0	0	0
Ayanna	15	10 Urban	Working	Probation	Chronic	0	0	0
Emily	18	GED Urban Emergent	Working (Kinship Care)	Probation	Chronic	2	1	1
Isis	17	12 Urban Emergent	Middle	Probation	Never	1	1	0
Ti–Ti	17	9 Urban Emergent	Working (Kinship Care)	Probation	Chronic	2	1	0

Table 2 Administrator participant demographics

Participant	Race	Sex	Experience	Role	School Level	District Type
Mr. Igziabeher	Black	Male	20 + years	Building Principal	Middle School	Urban
Mr. Mabaruti	Black	Male	20 + years	Assistant Principal	High School	Urban
Dr. Maurice	Black	Male	20 + years	Assistant Principal	High School	Urban Emergent
Mr. Owen	African-American	Male	20 + years	Assistant Principal	High School	Urban Emergent
Mrs. Baker	Black	Female	20 + years	Building Principal	Middle School	Urban Emergent

histories took place between 6 and 9th grades). All of the administrators served in lead or assistant principal roles, identified as Black or African American, and most were men (See Table 2).

For ethical reasons, the girls' and administrators' participation in the study were kept confidential from one another. It was important to maintain confidentiality because the county juvenile court system did not disclose youth probation status to schools. For this reason, I did not feel at liberty to divulge the full extent of their personal challenges to the administrators who participated in the study. Also, my intention was to resist pathologizing their behaviors by focusing more on their discipline histories than the intersecting systems inherent to them. For this reason, it was not necessary for the girls or administrators to discuss their specific experiences with each other, if any. Instead, the interviews with the administrators were decidedly focused on their approach to student discipline, with an emphasis on whether and how those practices differed when they involved Black girls. The interviews with the girls focused more on whether and how they were helped by school disciplinarians than on their specific relationships with particular administrators. My intention in doing this was to learn the policies and practices that are connected to school leaders' decision-making and to compare both groups' perceptions of those structures.

Storying Black Girls Experiences to Understand Leadership Practices

The qualitative method of "storying" was used through a Black feminist lens to attend to the aforementioned complexities in the participants' experiences. San Pedro and Kinloch (2017) define storying as a method to "willingly center the realities, desires, and stories of the people with whom we work" in ways that actively resist dominant discourses (p. 374S). For Black girls caught in the school/prison nexus this way of doing research constituted a "project in humanization" (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014) and was an important device given the ways that neoliberal narratives erase lived experiences. Studies with Black girls caught in the school/prison nexus is delicate work. Even in our efforts to ensure them a just world, it is easy to pathologize their experiences and behaviors in an effort to build empathy for them. Pain compels (Tuck & Yang, 2014) but Black girls and their decisions are more complex than narrow narratives. Storying, then, offered a method to capture "being/becoming in relation to those who impact us" (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017, p. 379S), as is the case in the complicated relationship between Black girls in chronic disciplinary patterns and school administrators.

To do this, the girls were asked to participate in three semi-structured interviews that, in line with Black Feminist Theory, privileged their individual standpoints, everyday sources of knowledge, intersectional identities, and relationship to power (Collins, 2000). The first interview asked the girls to tell stories about their educational journeys—asking as many questions about in- and out-of-school challenges as the sources of wisdom and sites of success they drew from to persevere. The second interview focused on the situations they were facing in the present moment. We discussed their legal situations, what it was like to navigate the court system while trying to go to school, their support networks, and how their legal status made them feel. The third and final interview invited the girls to freedom dream of future possibilities for both themselves and other Black girls caught in the school/prison nexus. The interviews occurred during a 9-month period as part of a larger narrative study that also included group conversations, arts-based methods, and participant observations regarding school re-entry after exclusionary discipline (Edwards, 2017).

By the second interview, all of the girls told stories about school administrators who played a significant role in their discipline histories. This prompted me to amend the study to elicit administrator perceptions regarding how they approach discipline with Black girls. I wondered how administrator ideas and practices about their disciplinary role compared to the girls' schooling experiences. To that end, the administrators were asked to participate in one, in-depth semi-structured interview and transcript review meeting. The purpose of the interview was two-fold: (1) to hear the stories administrators tell about Black girls' disciplinary experiences and; (2) to gain insight into how they perceive their connection to the discipline disparities Black girls face. The interviews occurred and were transcribed during the fourth month of the study. The transcript review meetings occurred one month later. At the meeting, the administrators were provided with a copy of the interview transcript, and a one-page summary highlighting key take-aways pertaining to their approach to discipline with Black girls. We reviewed the materials together and the administrators were given one additional month to review the transcripts with deeper scrutiny. At the end of that period, the administrators approved the data for inclusion in the study. This process was completed by the 6th month of the study.

Data Analysis

An iterative coding process was used to thematically analyze the stories the girls and administrators told about their discipline experiences. In vivo coding, which identifies participants' verbatim words as initial codes (Saldaña, 2013), was used in the first round of coding to break apart the data corpus. This process produced codes that were directly informed by what the participant's said, such as: "*It's gonna go in one ear and out the other*" (Julia) or "*My goal is never to be punitive*" (Dr. Maurice).

Focused coding was used across both the girls' and administrator's data in the second round to organize the in vivo codes into groups that were similar in content. The two in vivo codes referenced above, for example, were categorized as evidence of "Administrator Approaches to Discipline" because they reflected how the girls

experienced administrators' disciplinary efforts and how the administrators carried out discipline. The initial in vivo codes were refined into 27 categories through this process.

In the third and final round of coding, the in vivo codes within each category were organized into sub-themes for each participant group. The codes in the category referenced above, "Administrator Approaches to Discipline" where used as the basis for analysis in this study. The in vivo codes in this category were subcategorized into two groups: those pertaining to the girls' perceptions and those pertaining to the administrators' perceptions. Descriptive codes were then applied to group the in vivo codes in each sub-category in ways that demonstrated the themes within (See Fig. 1). This process refined the data corpus into five themes that directly addressed the study's research question: How do school leaders perceive their role in Black girls' school/prison nexus experiences?

Three themes were developed in the administrators' perceptions through this approach: (1) "palpable demonstrations of care," (2) "understanding the root causes of disciplinary problems" and, (3) "developing preventative disciplinary systems." Two themes were developed in the girls' data: (1) "passive discipline experiences" and (2) "problematic administrator strategies." I then compared the themes for each group to consider how the girls' experiences were in conversation with administrator approaches to discipline. In the process, a contrasting relationship between perspectives was apparent. The administrators' socially just conceptions of support for Black girls in challenging behavioral patterns were not aligned with the girls'

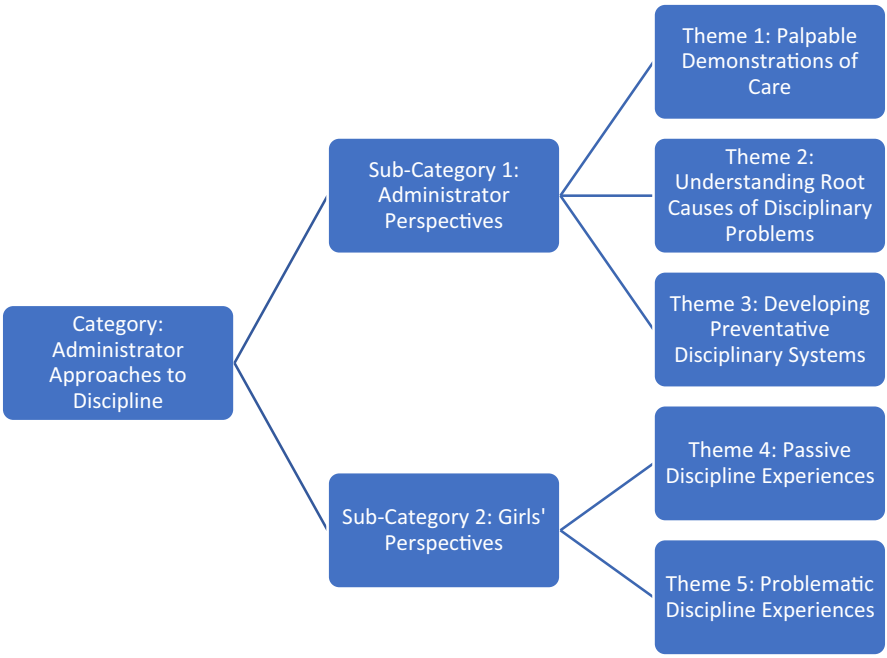

Fig. 1 Code map

descriptions of similar experiences; and as so, troubled the school leaders' ideas regarding what it means to enact socially just disciplinary responses.

Findings

The literature on Black girls' schooling experiences documents how rarely Black girls are afforded an opportunity to talk back to the policies, practices, and perceptions that misunderstand and deny space for their racialized gender (Evans-Winters, et al., 2018; Neal-Jackson, 2018). The findings from this study, then, are organized to bring the girls' and administrators' perceptions in conversation. I open with the administrators' perceptions regarding an imperative for palpable care, root cause analyses, and preventative disciplinary approaches; and follow with the girls' stories of passive and problematic disciplinary experiences that bring the administrators' priorities into question. Organizing the findings in this way reframes Black girls' "back talk" from a negative attribute that is often used against them to productive feedback on the usefulness of administrators' approaches to discipline. In so doing, we address the study's purpose to clarify the nature of school leaders' role in Black girls' school/prison nexus experiences.

Palpable Demonstrations of Care

The administrators shared that their first priority in supporting Black girls in chronic disciplinary patterns was to establish meaningful relationships premised on a palpable sense of care. They considered caring relationships to be the foundation upon which they worked to resist the criminalizing effects of exclusionary discipline, and shared stories about their efforts to do so on both the school and student levels. Dr. Maurice said, for example:

> Your students have to feel that you care about them because they know between genuine, and being fake. And so, if they know that you care about them, then they're real less likely to get in trouble. And that is big. They feel more compelled to actually open up and talk to you. If they don't see the caring, that's when they shut down and that's when you start having the different outbreaks. And that is big here with us. I think we have a staff that is nurturing from the top to the bottom.

This perspective demonstrates how the administrators regarded caring as a fundamental practice for producing the kind of environment where Black girls can thrive. Being genuine, nurturing, and ensuring that girls felt welcome by taking responsibility for cultivating a caring school culture were at the core of the administrators' philosophies. In telling the story of her choice to lead a school that was slated for closing, Mrs. Baker discussed the transformative power she experienced through this work:

> So, the first day that I met my students and the first student whose hand I shook, I looked into that student's eyes and said, "I see excellence in your eyes." And from that point forward it became a motto in our building…So that simple modeling of belief in the students set a tone in the building for the teachers. We worked very hard with that and so, I would say that the school was a place where the children felt welcomed. It was place where they really knew that we cared about them and it was a place where they knew that they could be successful because I set the tone.

These perspectives show how the administrators regarded themselves as being responsible for making care a tangible experience and guiding philosophy in their buildings.

The administrators also shared Dr. Maurice's perspective that it was important to prevent students in chronic disciplinary patterns from "shutting down," and patterned their interactions in ways that attempted to be open and loving to resist it. Mr. Mabaruti said, for example, that:

> I think I approach the boys and the girls pretty much the same and mine is a spirit of love. I think it's paramount that students really do know that you have their best interest at heart - that you care about them. And from there, you can kind of begin to relate or establish a relationship to the point that you're not a threat or perceived as the enemy and you can begin to kind of try to make headway on helping them develop into great people.

These excerpts illustrate how the principals seemed to genuinely care for their students and used relationship-building as key strategies to resist Black girls' criminalization. They shared how important it was to *show* Black girls, rather than *tell* them, that they care by being cognizant of how they use the power they hold over them.

The administrators' shared that their reasons for this approach were rooted in their identity as Black people. Mr. Owen, for example, said:

> Now, I can look at our [Black] children and come with love and care and with a second chance mind-set because I feel that connection. I know what it's like to be a Black youth in America. But, then for the white educator, does the white educator look at our children as they're looking at their own children? It is my role to ensure that they see that children are children. It is all about perception of the children that you are dealing with and how you feel about them and how you identify with them that I believe makes the difference. So I try to help my teachers understand that when girls get in trouble.

Here, Mr. Owens describes how his personal experience animates his desire to support Black girls in ways that create room for mistakes in school. He conveyed a sense of responsibility as a school leader to support his teachers with building the kind of self-awareness needed to resist classroom practices that marginalize Black youth. Mr. Igziabeher's perspective of his role echoes this sentiment: "My job as an administrator is to develop the whole teacher," he said.

> Not only do I have to develop his or her instructional practices, but I also have to help them develop the characteristics of a good teacher—developing that piece for where you have empathy for children. Where you have understanding and appreciation of varying cultures. I have to develop teachers to be cognizant of how to make accommodations in discipline so that we are trying to be preventative instead of punitive.

These perceptions suggest that the administrators view their role in Black girls' disciplinary experiences as being responsible for establishing a caring school culture through authentic interpersonal relationships and instructional leadership. Their stories suggest that in so doing, they create opportunities to challenge Black girls to grow through and beyond their setbacks.

Understanding the Root Causes of Disciplinary Problems

The administrators shared that their districts granted wide discretionary power for principals to mete out exclusionary discipline. Another reason, then, why caring relationships were central to their disciplinary approach with Black girls was because they helped them determine the kinds of consequences they would assign. Mr. Owen shared:

> How I draw [discipline] out will be different, as I kind of talked about in the beginning, about knowing your kids, knowing how they are, knowing their background or where they're coming from, or just listening to them. And a lot of times, for me, that will drive what words I'll choose to say [when I'm disciplining them] or even what consequence that I'll use.

For this reason, it was important for the administrators to understand why students were getting in trouble. The administrators foregrounded discursive practices that would allow them to do that: first, by having heart-felt conversations with Black girls who committed school infractions. The purpose of these meaningful conversations was to try to understand why a situation occurred. Parents would then be called for more conferencing before bringing in a school social worker or counselor, if necessary. For most, these conversations were accompanied by signing behavioral contracts, and in Mr. Mabaruti's case, a school-based "stay away order" to try to prevent girls who fought from engaging one another until they could do so peacefully. The outcome of these conversations and willingness to sign contracts often determined what consequences the administrators would determine. The administrators suggested that they worked in this way as a matter of equity, so that punishments were appropriately aligned with the severity of an infraction. To this point, Mr. Mabaruti said:

> I feel that it's not a cookie cutter remedy for correcting behavior because every circumstance or situation really is different. Every child is different. Every child's home life is different. And so as we establish relationships with chil-

> dren enough to know some of the intricacies about them as an individual, it could vary as to what really needs to happen.

This point signals how the administrators used relationships and conferencing as important strategies to undermine school district discipline policies, an important subversive practice against the authority school systems give to principals to act punitively. Mrs. Baker addressed how understanding root causes of behavior supported her decision to act in this way. She said:

> I would say that the principal is the gatekeeper to everything that happens in the building and how you handle it makes all the difference in the world. And because I had that leverage to use discretion with discipline, I took the liberties to not always follow [district policies], especially when it came to something like a fight or if the child used profanity against the teacher.

The administrators also discussed how they used what they knew about students' behavioral motivations to support teachers in having empathy for challenging girls, to understand the reasons why certain discipline decisions were made, or to mentor them in ways that take on relationship-building methods themselves. Dr. Maurice said,

> I'm able to actually go and tell the teacher, "Hey, they have a real sensitive issue at home" and some of the girls have a relationship with the teachers and they talk to them about it or get help from them, too.

But the administrators emphasized that these relationships and the information they garner are inadequate to the task of equitably supporting Black girls on a systemic level. They discussed how under-resourced they are to address the needs they learn about. Some administrators shared a single social worker with up to 5 other schools, despite the need to support Black girls facing homelessness, grief, and family conflict. When asked to share the things he needed to adequately support Black girls in chronic discipline patterns, Mr. Igziabeher said:

> If you had unlimited resources where a principal could funnel unlimited resources to help children. From the time they walk in, their needs are met. They're hungry, they're fed. Clothing is given to them. The heat is on, the air is on, the lights are on, the building is comfortable, and quality staff to help with all of their needs. We have 1 social worker [for] 1800 students at this school. There should be a social worker on every grade level! There should be teacher aids in every classroom! So, if we allocated funds to where we could have all of these resources, then more girls would have a chance of being successful.

In addition to lacking resources to support Black girls, the administrators discussed how competing demands for their attention further complicate their ability to equitably allocate the supports and opportunities they do have. "You're trying to do a delicate balancing act to be fair," said Mr. Owen regarding navigating discipline and socio-economic diversity in his school:

> to be just, to understand both [affluent and non-affluent] students and the parents. So, you have to be politically astute. You have to be very diplomatic and you have to be able to speak languages both groups understand because even though the issues may be the same, how you deal with those issues and how you talk to different sets of parents and student can be all the difference. And if you don't have a good balancing act, you can appear to be more favorable to one than the other. Or to pass judgement and give harsher consequences to one than the other if you're not understanding both.

This view was consistent with characterizations the administrators gave regarding how they determined consequences. Though they attempted to make decisions based upon students' personal circumstances, they described being able to do that only to the extent that their resources and constituents allowed.

These findings regarding the usefulness of understanding the root causes of Black girls' misbehavior suggests that the administrators perceived their role as equity-focused disciplinarians who resisted punitive discipline with Black girls. They carried this ethos into their role as instructional leaders as they worked to foster relationships between teachers and students; and they called for resources, particularly an increase in school social workers, as an important equitable response to support Black girls. Still, they experienced systemic constraints that interrupted the degree to which they could realize their ambitions to enact critical care (Wilson, 2016).

Developing Preventative Disciplinary Systems

The administrators also talked about the systems they used to prevent discipline problems. They spoke of girls for whom they coordinated multiple opportunities for behavioral change. This, in tandem with stories about using their discretion to outright refuse exclusionary discipline, suggests that they conceptualized a central part of their role as interrupting the criminalizing processes Black girls face. Through multi-tiered systems of support, reserving exclusionary discipline for instances of serious violence, incorporating social-emotional learning as a regular curricular component, and making special accommodations for students in chronic disciplinary patterns, the administrators worked to undermine the entrapments of the school/prison nexus through gradual, responsive, and proactive interventions. Dr. Maurice said:

> You see, it's one thing just to suspend a child and suspend a child. You know, that's punitive. But what did you do to actually try to help the child? And so, that's what we try to do. We try to come up with measures to actually say well, "I talked to them. The counselor talked to them. We think she might need to be referred to the psychologist. They might need some other type of intervention." Well, that other person is here in the building and that psychologist can go to the house and that's not punitive. They're there to provide a service…. This child looks like she needs some type of service other than just being sent home.

His sentiments were echoed by Mr. Igziabeher, who shared:

> We don't give an adaptive response. We try to do a little bit more of a constructive response to discipline issues. We're going to develop [the student] to be able to elicit and appreciate what somebody else says and value what somebody else experienced as opposed to only viewing their own paradigm.

These sentiments are indicative of the administrators' desire to support their students in ways that can be considered restorative (Winn, 2018). As social justice leaders do, they practiced showing care in ways that were aware of and responsive to the challenges Black girls face. All of the administrators expressed this type of awareness; using their role to provide alternatives to school removal and to teach students important dispositions for positive school climate. Mrs. Baker said:

> Some administrators would be like, "Oh, if she's causing a problem in my building, she's got to go. You know? She's got to get out of here." But where are we sending our children to? Who's going to take care of them if we haven't done all that we can do to take care of our students. You know?

The administrators' testimonies assert that the Black girls they served were in a context of care and that interventions were meted out in ways that were gradual, appropriate, and supportive. They drew upon many interpersonal and systemic opportunities to work in ways that prevent the criminalizing processes Black girls are subject to in schools. These efforts demonstrate administrator attempts to work on behalf of social justice. They expressed that their roles in Black girls' disciplinary experiences were to ensure that girls know and feel that they are cared for through cultivating positive school culture and interpersonal relationships, to coordinate opportunities to mitigate the effects of exclusionary discipline based on the relationships and knowledge they have of Black girls, and to make use of whatever systemic opportunities are at their disposal to support their educational well-being.

The Girls' Passive Discipline Experiences

The girls' stories reflected experiences with the types of interventions that the administrators characterized as central to their equity-focused discipline practices. They shared what it was like to navigate tiered intervention systems, special programs in and outside of the school day for "at-risk" girls, and heart-felt behavioral conferences to establish relationships with them. They told stories of teachers and administrators who gave multiple chances to reform and who offered alternatives to suspension and expulsion. They refuted, however, the usefulness of these attempts. I call these ineffective efforts "null-experiences" because the girls demonstrate how they neither gained nor benefited from these kinds of interactions.

Julia's experience, for example, describes a passive process where she was asked to endure being told what to do and to listen to educators who talked to her instead of with her. She said:

> Behavior conferences, suspension, all of that, it's like nothing…People getting on your nerves. Cuz [they ask], "How you doing, Julia? Asking me questions

> and you gotta sit there – wait all day! You have people telling you what to do and what not to do and stuff. Sometimes I'm listening if they don't wear me out. Cuz if they wear me out it's going to go in one ear and out the other. I already heard it a billion times. They just always ask me how my baby doing. Try to tell me how they childhood was and all that stuff. Finish school and get a job and stuff like that…. I heard it a thousand times.

Her experience shows how educators' attempts to convey care by asking about her child, being open about their own stories, and encouraging her to complete her education was taxing—amounting to a lecture she had heard many times before. Ti–Ti experienced a similarly passive experience when she shared:

> And a lot of people tell me, "You're too pretty to get in trouble." Like, "You're too pretty to do this" and I'm just like, "ok." I be like, "Ok. I don't care. You can't tell me what to do" or this and that, like…. I just laughed. They said, "You should be like a nurse or something." I was like… [rolls eyes].

In attempting to inspire her to change, Ti–Ti described educators who tried to appeal to her vanity to encourage conformity to hegemonic notions of femininity. The educator may have attempted to make her feel visible in hopes that flattery would inspire change. Her ambivalence to their suggestion, however, shows how this type of prescriptive gender performance was irrelevant to her needs, desires, and choices. Julia and Ti–Ti's voices, then, illustrate a "null-experience" in that there was a lack of connection between what the educators did and what the girls experienced—even when administrators intended to communicate that they cared. These passive, lecture-based ways of relational practice invited both girls to disassociate from the intention of the meetings.

Although Julia and Ti–Ti shared that they had administrators who tried to understand and connect with them through lecture-based strategies, Ayanna, Emily and Isis did not. For these girls, administrators, "just give me my consequence and send me about my way," as Emily shared. Isis, for example, was the only participant in the study without a chronic discipline history. She was an honor roll student, scholar athlete, and musician who fought to stop cyber-bullying that had been escalating for months. Her aggressor tried to intimidate her at her house several times before they finally fought at school. When Isis' principal got involved, he confiscated her phone, searched her locker, expelled her, and pressed charges against her for public disturbance, even though she had evidence that she fought in self-defense. "I feel like they wanted to make an example out of me," she said. Her experience, like that of Ayanna and Emily, present another version of passive discipline experiences—one that is common among Black girls caught in the school/prison nexus. Their voices were denied through the discipline process and in effect, administrators pushed them out of school (Neal-Jackson, 2018). Still, both the caring approach described in Julia and Ti–Ti's experiences and the punitive approaches described by Emily, Isis, and Ayanna harken Paulo Freire's (2000) conception of "banking." We find the educators at the center and the girls peripheral. Read in this light, we begin to see how administrators' conceptions of care can almost serve a coercive role—telling the

girls to conform to the schools' expectations without questioning the socially constituted nature of behavior (Edwards, 2020).

The Girls' Problematic Discipline Experiences

The girls also discussed how the broader school environment played a role in their behavior. Emily, for example, attended a middle school with a reputation for being dangerous. She shared:

> It was really bad. It was, like, fights every day. People brought weapons to school, drugs to school. And, like, the people in my neighborhood where we lived, they would always be outside with guns and stuff…. Sometimes, I'm not gonna lie, I would be scared. Academically, I was failing everything. Like, I didn't pass anything in 6th grade. I wasn't focused because my attention was on other things, like what everyone else was doing instead of what I was supposed to be doing.

Emily established a reputation for herself as a fighter in this context and understandably so. For all of the girls, being able to fight was an important strategy for preventing and stopping bullying and also for finding friends. It is plausible, then, that establishing meaningful relationships with administrators in school contexts where fighting is justifiable is inadequate to the task of ensuring the physical safety of Black girls both in and out of schools.

For example, the girls shared experiences demonstrating how strategies like those described by the administrators actually exacerbated problems. Ayanna, for example, described educators who problematically encouraged her to respond to student conflict by ignoring it. She said:

> Everybody tried to get through to me. They would say, "They're not worth it. Just walk away" and stuff like that. But back then, if you walk away, everybody be like, "You scary! You a punk!" Like, they'll call you out and stuff like that. So, that's why people just fight…because they don't want to be called a certain name.

In Ayanna's school context, a non-violent choice could intensify problems. This does not suggest that educators should allow students to fight, but illustrates how responses administrators assume are caring may overlook the complexity of girls' choices (Esposito & Edwards, 2018). Isis echoed this experience when sharing her mother's recommendation that she see her principal about being cyber-bullied:

> My mom was like, "Go to the principal. Go to the principal." But the school doesn't do anything. They just make the situation worse because, like, they'll call the girls to the office and be like, "Oh, so and so said this." That doesn't do anything but make it worse. Cuz they'll still talk about you even worse.

Isis' experience calls into question mediation strategies like those the administrator's used to provide constructive responses to student conflict. In effect, Ayanna and Isis' experiences show how even attempts to understand the root causes of

challenging behaviors can result in implausible solutions that are out of touch with girls' realities. As Brown (2003) noted, girls living at the intersections of racism and poverty often fight to protect themselves socially, emotionally, and physically; and relational aggression among them can be as intense and palpable as physical fighting (Bright, 2005). Attempts to mediate girls' conflicts that do not consider these factors run the risk of centering the schools' interests.

Further, Ayanna shared that in her experience, there was a difference in how she was treated in conference settings depending on whether the administrator was white or Black. She said, "Black principals understand. Like, how some Black people know where you come from. And white people just don't want to hear it. Like, white people think it be excuses when it be, like, for real." In this experience, Ayanna was telling the story of her decision to skip school, which led to her probation. Through elementary school and most of middle school, she was bullied about her dark skin and short hair. She discussed how deeply she desired to fit in and be protected from peer aggression, so when she received an opportunity to make friends with those who normally made school difficult, she took the opportunity. She discussed how she sat in more principal's, school social worker, teacher, and counselor offices than she could remember, but her desire to belong outweighed her desire to be in school. She shared that she felt that all of the adults in her life cared, but after a while, they gave up: "But then when they realize you not understanding and you gon' do what you want to do anyways," she said, "they really don't get on you as much as they did at first."

In addition to stories about administrators who made problems worse, were skeptical about the reasons why they were acting out, or who gave up on them, they also told stories about educators' over-reliance on mental health referrals. Emily's experience is notable:

> I had anger problems [and] this girl, she made me so mad…. So, you know how we had the little square desks? I picked it up and I threw it at her. So they were talking about expelling me, but they didn't. They were like, I need counseling and stuff, so my mom, she took me to counseling, but I wouldn't talk to the counselor. Well, my grandma always told us that counselors brainwash you so I didn't feel comfortable talking to her. And [the counselor] tried to make me to talk to her. Like, "you're not leaving here until you talk to me!" So, I would eventually say a little and that's it. But, like, I really didn't talk to her or tell her what was, like, actually going on…. I would just sit there. I just didn't feel comfortable opening up to, like, a complete stranger. Like, I didn't know you so why would I tell you my business?

Though the referral was made with good intentions, opting to support her over expelling her, Emily was uncomfortable with receiving counseling and resisted the opportunity to engage in it. Given the troubling history of the relationship between Black communities and social scientists; and the justifiable stigma many Black Americans hold about mental health services as a result (Gaston et al., 2016), the referral was made without understanding how it might actually play an adverse role in her experience. We see here another problematic discipline experience that is

indicative of how administrators' attempts to care can occur in ways that are culturally and contextually irrelevant.

Discussion

I cannot make a direct comparison between the administrators' strategies and the girls' experiences because they did not attend the same schools in every case. However, I infer from the differences in their stories that the administrators' practices were not standard for their districts. As so, the administrators' perceptions and practices are indicative of the wide discretionary power administrators have in school discipline and the lack of control they have regarding how students in general, and Black girls in particular, experience it. Although the administrators rightfully used many interpersonal and systemic approaches to resist punitive disciplinary responses, positioning the girls' experiences to talk back to the administrators' perceptions suggests their actions may not hold the transformative power they assume.

Specifically, the girls' back talk calls out the systemic inadequacies that interrupt administrators' efforts to mete discipline in ways that are socially just. As DeMatthews et al. (2015) asserted: "a principal's social justice orientation or worldview is necessary and important to the creation of more socially just schools, but not sufficient given the complexity of schools and decisions" (p. 17). Urban principals are stretched in many directions as they work to serve the stakeholders of the educational marketplace. They are subject to policies and initiatives impressed upon them by their districts, are forced to make decisions in the midst of competing interests, and spend the majority of their time dealing with school-community demands (Spillane et al., 2002; Theoharris, 2007). Further, the continued reliance on standardized metrics makes it difficult to implement student-centered, culturally relevant, restorative, or healing-informed approaches to student engagement. As school viability hinges on these metrics in under-resourced systems premised on competition, educators have less capacity to provide Black girls with additional supports—behavioral or otherwise (Fuentes, 2018). The multifaceted nature of the job, then, makes equitable practice difficult for even the most astute social justice administrators (DeMatthews et al., 2015).

Also, these demands operate without regard for the intersectional formations at play in Black girls' decisions to disengage from school (Morris, 2016). Black girls' criminalization in schools, for example, is patterned through the pervasive threat of their adultification (Epstein, 2017), an outright rejection of their cultural practices, and fundamental misunderstandings about their gender performances (Neal-Jackson, 2018). Structuring preventative opportunities that fail to take these and other contextually specific factors into account do more to reify a hidden curriculum that teaches Black girl deficiencies than adequately addresses their unique needs (Evans-Winters et al., 2018).

The girls' back talk demonstrates how administrators' approaches place onus on students to conform to institutional standards, even when they are intended to communicate care. This is likely because of the anxieties the educational marketplace stirs about controlling student behavior in ways that influence achievement. This

hypervigilance regarding student performance limits what care can look like. Evidence from Black girlhood studies suggests that restorative, culturally sustaining, and interdisciplinary approaches affirm and strengthen Black girls' literacies, identities, and relationship to school (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016). Yet, these ideas were noticeably absent from the administrators' perceptions. This silence around culturally sustaining school policy further evidences how relational and justice-oriented commitments can be used to advance neoliberal priorities (Dumas, 2013).

The administrators' emphasis on fostering personal accountability through interpersonal dynamics and schooling systems also demonstrates how racialized neoliberalism encroaches upon the student/administrator relationship. According to the girls, several school leaders tried to make heart-felt connections with them in order to influence compliance. Communicating care in the racialized neoliberal urban context, then, may function in ways that attempt to save students from a culture of pathology educators assume to be true of Black urban students (Cammarota, 2011). Though the administrators' attempted to be sensitive and preventative, the girls' experiences evidence how heart-felt and socially conscious intentions were leveraged to demand conformity; and while this reality certainly applies to all students, it affects Black girls in specific ways. When administrators use care to influence Black girls' behavior, they are contending with a long history of policing Black girls' behavior to problematically demand respectability and affirm dissemblance (Higgenbotham, 1993; Hine, 1989). Though these practices have ensured Black women and girls' survival, they are public acts of personal suppression that bolster white supremacy and other forms of social domination (White, 2001). Read in this light, Black girls who do not conform to the NRP's behavioral demands are made unworthy of respect (Nyachae & Ohito, 2019), a powerful signifier further justifying their exclusion from school.

This point does not suggest that administrators and teachers knowingly enact false generosity (Freire, 2000) and promote gender racism when they try to "reach" Black girls in disciplinary patterns. They, too, are subject to the hegemonic nature of the NRP. As so, they are responsible for managing and, perhaps in futility, correcting the disparities created by neoliberal racial projects (Cammarota, 2011). In this context, the onus for reform is placed on Black girls instead of finding space to teach discipline as a culturally-relevant practice (Milner, 2020). This individualistic orientation absolves schools from facing the institutional factors that are at play in perceived student misbehavior, over-simplifies the degree to which communicating care functions in students' lives, and obscures how school leaders are hegemonically positioned to advance the imperatives of a market-based educational system. These workings effectively contribute to Black girls' adultification in schools, as they are made to bear the burdens schools create in their lives (Epstein et al., 2017).

This is not to suggest that Black girls should not be held accountable for their decisions when they harm themselves and others, but to show that girls and schools are actors in a mutual relationship (Winn, 2018). Efforts to develop harmonious and intellectually engaged school communities must acknowledge and address the behaviors of both the student and the school (Edwards, 2020), and have an awareness of the intersections between antiblackness and Black girls' gender performance. From this place of understanding, school leaders can begin to cultivate safe spaces

with Black girls. Further, we might also begin to understand Black girls' choices to reject schooling as valid and use their reasons for doing so to freedom dream of educational communities that are independent of neoliberal resources and logics (Love, 2019).

Conclusion

Julia, Ti–Ti, Ayanna, Isis, and Emily's stories show us how attempting to enact social justice leadership is a site of political and affective contestation in the neoliberal urban context. Because the contemporary educational policy-scape continues to be deeply tied to free market priorities, corporal control is fundamentally necessary to the project of schooling. This, in turn, necessitates the use of exclusionary discipline—even when administrators resist using it. Neoliberal racial projects also assume a deficit orientation about Black girls which stirs certain anxieties that problematically position school leaders in relationship to them. Therefore, administrators must be willing to interrogate the degree to which their actions authentically connect with Black girls' realities if they intend to disrupt the neoliberal racial formations at play in their schools.

Black girls caught in the school/prison nexus face multiple systemic barriers to being seen and heard. Experiencing rejection from school offers another site of struggle in situations that may already be challenging. Black girls' behaviors, then, should not be considered surprising or unwarranted—especially considering that defiance is a strategy and response that has sustained Black women through the historical record (Hartman, 2019). Educators should view resistance, then, as valuable feedback to inform liberatory practice and policy instead of a threat to school performance. From this perspective, Black girls' "misbehavior" is indicative of their resilience in a schooling system designed for their marginalization; and should be celebrated for the liberation their actions call out of schools and their systems.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no conflict of interest to report as it pertains to this study.

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