EducationWeek®

SCHOOL CLIMATE & SAFETY OPINION

Q&A With Monique W. Morris: How K-12 Schools Push Out Black Girls

May 31, 2016 13 min read

As a researcher and author working at the intersection of education, civil rights, and juvenile and social justice, Monique W. Morris has long studied the issues women of color face in the United States. She is co-founder and president of the National Black Women's Justice Institute—a Berkeley, Calif.-based nonprofit organization that works to improve racial and gender disparities in the criminal justice system for black women. Morris previously served as a vice president for economic programs, advocacy, and research at the NAACP. She and Rebecca Epstein, executive director of the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, are currently partnering in a two-year project to improve the relationships between girls of color and school resource officers.

Her latest research sheds a light on the treatment of black girls in K-12 schools. In her fourth book, Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools *(New Press, 2016), Morris takes a closer look at the educational policies, practices, and conditions in U.S. schools that marginalize black girls both academically and socially as early, she argues, as pre-K. In the book, Morris unpacks the racial and gendered stereotypes that affect how schools respond to black girls on a daily basis.*

— Image by Positive Images, courtesy of The New Press

Recent studies from the U.S. Department of Education's office for civil rights show that many current disciplinary measures end up barring these young students from schools at higher rates than those for

any other female student group and most male groups, which puts them at greater risk of entering the juvenile justice system. Morris frames this research around the stories of girls she spoke with across the country who experienced "pushout"—defined as the practices that foster criminalization in schools and how this criminalization leads to imprisonment—to expose what she says are the untold stories of the conditions that remain a barrier to black girls' education and well-being.

Commentary Associate Kate Stoltzfus interviewed Monique W. Morris by phone to discuss why young black girls are disproportionately pushed out of schools and how educators and policymakers can join forces with their communities to create school environments that allow all black girls to thrive in the classroom.

EW: Black girls are 16 percent of the female student population in public schools in the United States but more than one-third of all female school-based arrests, according to 2011-12 data from the U.S. Department of Education's office for civil rights. The disparities between how schools discipline black female students and all other female student groups, as well as many male groups, start as early as preschool. How do we begin to make sense of this polarizing gap?

MORRIS: One of the things I've been sharing in this conversation about school pushout and black girls is that black girls are the only group of girls who are disproportionately overrepresented in all categories for which discipline data are collected by the U.S. Department of Education. When we look at this continuum of discipline in partnership with the community conditions, the ways in which our society has misunderstood and misrepresented elements of black femininity, and the other issues that contribute to school pushout like academic marginalization or underperformance in school, we start to understand that this is not about girls just being bad. We start to see a set of conditions that presents a unique opportunity for there to be a vulnerability to contact with the criminal legal system and contact with school disciplinarians or policies and practices. What we're talking about is the convergence of multiple factors. These are girls who are dealing with multiple forms of victimization, abuse, and oppression, and their response to that oppression is often misread as combative, angry behavior.

Sometimes it is angry, and that doesn't make it any less victimizing. So when we're talking about contact with the disciplinary authorities in schools and black girls, it's important for us to understand the centrality of trauma and to also explore the cultural conditions that have facilitated a consciousness that renders black girls uniquely vulnerable to having their behaviors being read as loud and aggressive and dangerous to the school environment when they may not necessarily be so.

There are a host of ways in which black girls are uniquely feeling that their presence in school is not consistent with who the school believes should be there.

EW: In the process of writing *Pushout*, you talked with black girls in elementary through high schools across the country about their experiences in education. What did those conversations reveal to you that statistics or formal research couldn't?

MORRIS: I worked backwards and talked to girls who had experienced school pushout, who had been removed from school, who were being educated in juvenile detention facilities. I talked to them about what their education story was, and in almost all of those cases, these black girls understood that education was important to them. At the same time, while they valued education in theory, they had gone to schools and had engagement with educators that was telling them something different. Almost all of the girls had been suspended or expelled early on in their lives, having their first experiences with suspension in kindergarten and 1st grade. They had experience with racial and gendered bias from the educators in their lives as well as with the other caring adults on campus. They also described being repeatedly victimized in community and in schools, and having that victimization either rendered secondary to the pain and victimization of their male counterparts, or not believed in their spaces of learning and in their homes. What has happened in their lives is that they express the way children do when they have been exposed to trauma and victimization; they have acted out in ways that adults have deemed disruptive. Their narratives represent an opportunity to hear from the viewpoint of girls who have experienced school pushout what their stories are and how they believe the community of caring adults could better understand to these conditions.

EW: You described seeing a "raw, uncultivated version" of yourself in the girls you spoke with. How do your own past experiences in school inform your exploration of the criminalization of black girls in education?

MORRIS: I was always a high performer in school, but that didn't mean I was not subjected to differential treatment from some educators or to some of the thoughts and comments that triggered me in other ways to question my own behavior and my own body. I am a survivor of sexual assault, and this early victimization in my life has shaped how I read and respond to girls who also risk sexual victimization and who are in schools where now there are dress-code policies that allow for adults to continuously police the bodies of girls and to police the bodies of black girls in ways that they perceive to be different than the way in which their white or Asian counterparts have their bodies policed. My very first job was as a student teacher in the Summer Bridge Program in San Francisco. I have always understood that education is an important factor in the development and healthy wellbeing of our communities. I establish in the book the critical role that education has played in the lives of black women and black girls historically. What we've got to do as the community of caring adults, as educators, as those who are committed to educational equity, is to continue to interrogate and center the narratives of girls in ways that allow for us to establish more robust and critical engagements. My personal background and training as a researcher in the criminal and juvenile legal field contributes to that. Having the opportunity to engage with girls who had been in contact with the justice system and were trying to get back into school or who had been commercially sexually exploited and out of school for a long time, their narratives were not engaged the way that I felt they could be, especially when they overlapped with the oppressions that are faced by girls uniquely as a function of their race and gender. That's where I started to ask a series of questions: Why aren't they in school? What is happening in school that makes them feel like they can't be there?

EW: As you note in your book, in a nationwide culture of increased surveillance and zero-tolerance-behavior policies in schools, unconscious bias created by racial and gendered stereotypes in America increases the exclusion of black girls from learning spaces, which has the potential to push girls who are already struggling into the criminal justice system. What do you believe are the biggest issues facing K-12 black female students?

MORRIS: What we're dealing with are a serious of issues that are tied to harsh punishment in response to problematic student behavior. You get cases like a six-year-old girl having a tantrum in her kindergarten class and instead of her being engaged with love or responded to with some degree of caring, she is placed in handcuffs in the backseat of a police car. There are a host of ways in which black girls are uniquely feeling that their presence in school is not consistent with who the school believes should be there. For black girls who tend to attend these hyper-segregated schools that are high-poverty and often low-performing, they are in schools where there is the belief among administrators that zero-tolerance responses to negative student behavior is the way to curb negative student behavior. This is rather than the development of a continuum of responses or restorative practices that allow for young people to come to terms

with how they have created harm and who will be responsible for resolving the harm together—co-constructing discipline and other policies that impact them. What's happening here is the presence of biased learning environments and the absence of resources and other college and career pathways that can facilitate healing in response to much of the problematic behavior and the underlying causes of the problematic behavior.

EW: You say that one of the biggest causes of the discipline disparity is that black girls do not fit into society's narrow definition of femininity. You note in your book that black girls are subject to more scrutiny and put into two categories: either "good" girls or "ghetto" girls, both of which reinforce historical and current stereotypes about black femininity. How can educators combat their unconscious bias and help to recast the negative images of young female black students often perpetuated by American culture?

MORRIS: I believe most educators are in the field because they love children and believe in the promise of education. I also believe that we are all living with unconscious bias that informs how we read behaviors, what decisions we make, and how we interpret language, volume, and presentation. Whether it aligns with our professed beliefs or not, we are still impacted by negative stereotypes about individuals and identity. In order for us to come to terms with that, we have to engage in the development of other tools, training, and decision-making instruments that serve as a guide for us to engage in a much more equitable way when we're talking about how we respond to children. I don't think that society's narrow definition of femininity, which aligns most closely to what is normed for white, middle-class families, serves anyone particularly well. It has a particular impact on girls who are perceived as the opposite of that. If girls are loud rather than quiet or present in ways that are typically perceived as more masculine than wearing a skirt, that's a problem. When we don't have a particularly diverse teaching force, then we have a greater likelihood that the individuals engaging with youth from various backgrounds are not necessarily going to understand, at least innately, what is happening. What needs to happen is a much more robust discussion in teachers' preparation and training opportunities about implicit bias, decision-making matrices, and the ways in which youth can be brought into establishing both a school and classroom culture that honors their norms as well as those that are typically enforced by schools. I'm also of that mind that while dress codes are increasing in popularity among schools—especially when we're talking about the codes that most directly impact girls—they have little to do with how girls learn. There is an opportunity for us to think about dress codes, to examine them, and to, at a very minimum, remove language that has a disproportionate impact on black girls and girls of color in a way that is negative in order for us to really move forward with supporting them as critical thinkers and learners in schools.

EW: You offer solutions to cultivate quality learning environments for young black female students, including protection from victimization; fostering discussions about healthy, intimate relationships; quality student-teacher relationships; creating school wraparound services; providing more focus on learning and less focus on discipline; and establishing school-credit recovery between alternative schools (such as those in detention centers) and district schools. What might putting these solutions into practice look like—both at the policy and classroom level?

MORRIS: Schools can either reinforce dominant ideas that are present in society, or they can actively work to develop skillsets among young people to be critical participants in the process of developing the society they want to be a part of and live in. There need to be particular conditions in place: developing healing-informed responses to problematic student behavior and healing-informed classrooms in schools (in recognition of trauma that is alive in many ways among girls who are most at-risk of school pushout), establishing college and career pathways for girls, and developing de-biased learning (which includes culturally-competent, gender-responsive curriculum; integrating the arts; and directly addressing the issue of implicit bias). It's important for us to think about how we engage young people in co-constructing with adults the kind of learning environment that we want to facilitate and have in place.

EW: In continuing to seek solutions, you are traveling the country with Rebecca Epstein, executive director of the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, to speak with girls of color and school police officers. Can you explain what this work is and talk about what these conversations have revealed? Where you would like the larger conversation about the involvement of law enforcement in school discipline to go?

MORRIS: The project that the National Black Women's Justice Institute and the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality are involved in is broader than just black girls. It's looking at girls of color and their relationship to school resource officers. The policies and practices that have been put in place in response to these elevated discipline rates for girls of color were not constructed with girls in mind. There's been very little that explores the actions that officers are called to enforce in schools. The only time we hear about engagement with law enforcement and girls of color is if there has been an arrest on campus and it makes the news in some way. What we wanted to do was engage law enforcement officers in an opportunity to talk about how they see their role as school resource officers and what engagement and training they've had on working specifically with girls of color. School resource officers have become part of the school climate, so it's very important to talk to them, too, about the implicit biases that they are engaging when they interface with girls of color and what kinds of training they're receiving to help reduce the use of harmful tactics when talking to and working with girls of color.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.