

Subjective Discipline and the Social Control of Black Girls in Pipeline Schools

Jennifer Martin

University of Mount Union

Julia Smith

Oakland University

ABSTRACT: Using an intersectional feminist critical race lens, we utilized the Education Longitudinal Study (2002) data comparing tenth grade African American girls to White girls, analyzing whether the student was ever held back, teacher reports of problem behaviors in classrooms, and whether the student did not graduate from high school in the four years following her tenth-grade year, to determine if subjective discipline and social control of Black girls leads to eventual school dropout. Essentially, we asked, are African American girls who are retained and/or subjected to other more informal push-out policies more apt to leave school on their own? The findings confirmed, first, that African American girls were at much higher risk of both grade retention and informal reports of discipline problems from teachers, even after controlling for family factors, school quality, and teacher quality. We then confirmed that while family, school, and teacher quality factors did not explain away the much higher dropout rate of African American girls, the differences in history of grade retention and teacher discipline completed equated the two groups. These findings provide support for the “push-out” explanation put forward in the literature.

Keywords: School pushout, subjective discipline, social control, Black girls, pipeline schools, intersectionality

Overview and Related Research

“There would be no lynching if it did not start in the classroom” (Woodson, 1933, p. 8).

The U.S. education system has a history of institutional racism, glaringly revealed in differential discipline favoring White students and disadvantaging Black and Brown students (Black, 2016). What is not quite as clear is how this differential system of discipline is meted out in very gendered terms. In recent years, educational researchers have explicated the problem of the school-to-prison pipeline and its impact on urban populations, specifically its negative effects on African American boys. More recently, the African American Policy Forum and scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw and Monique Morris have raised the call to include African American girls in this conversation, because their social exclusion and pushout from schools is being minimized and ignored by gendered policies and programs that focus primarily on boys. According to Morris (2016), “While boys receive more than two out of three suspensions, Black girls are suspended at higher rates (12%) than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys” (p. 13). In fact, Morris argues that the treatment of African American girls in schools is far more insidious and subversive, with much disciplining of and control over appearance, often done in informal ways, but with the end result being the punishment of Black girl aesthetics, such as natural hair, dreadlocks, or braids, being deemed as “disruptive.”

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2012), African

American students are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled. Although they make up only 18% of the overall student population, African American students make up 46% of those students suspended more than one time. One in four African American students are suspended at least once compared to one in 11 White students (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2012). In the 60 years post *Brown v. Board of Education*, we find ourselves with a re-segregated educational system where students of color experience structural inequalities (Lee, 2003), and we argue that African American girls are disproportionately disadvantaged by such segregation. Sharma, Joyner, and Osment (2014) found that such segregation and racial isolation results in the decreased performance of minority students on standardized English and mathematics examinations, which serves to reinforce the stereotypical ideology that Blacks are less intelligent than Whites (Penner & Saperstein, 2013; Steele and Aronson, 1995) and subsequently, that Black students are unable to perform as well as Whites because of cultural deficits (Spencer, 2012) or inherent intellectual ineptitude (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014). Couple this with differential discipline and punitive policies, and the results are beyond disastrous.

The perception of Blackness as deviant has severe implications for education, and school discipline is perhaps the area where this is most glaring. Students of color are referred for more arbitrary and subjective concerns and for less serious offences that may not result in a referral for a White student. The *perception* of a threat (by Black students) is an issue (for White teachers). What is perceived as a threat when committed by a Black student is commonly not considered a threat when committed by a White student (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006, p. 9). Zion and Blanchett (2011) identify a second latent function of education: social control. The function of education as a mechanism of social control is manifest in the utilization of disciplinary techniques to manage and control students identified as disruptive (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002).

In an effort to ensure safety and control, particularly “post-Columbine,” the infamous 1999 massacre of 13 high school students in Littleton, Colorado at the hands of two of their classmates (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003), disciplinary policies fashioned after the “zero tolerance” model have become standard (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, Fred, & Joubert, 2010). Most African American girls attend what could be considered as urban or “Apartheid” schools (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2004). Such schools are subject to zero tolerance policies, police intervention and surveillance, and strict discipline policies. Such schools are also most often located in urban environments, employ underprepared teachers, lack resources, and often operate from deficit mindsets, and low expectations and academic rigor (Milner, 2013). In these Apartheid schools, students are viewed as criminals or potential criminals; their lack of academic success is then blamed on them, their culture, or their families, as opposed to a system stacked against them. According to the African American Policy Forum (2015), “at-risk young women describe zero-tolerance schools as chaotic environments in which discipline is prioritized over educational attainment” (pp.12-13). What we intend to make clear in this paper is that what African American girls face specifically is a vicious circle where low expectations and implicit bias leads to school push out for many. Colorblind ideologies, coupled with the absence of analysis of White hegemony and its corresponding social, linguistic, and behavioral standards and norms, exacerbate this current reality.

Another discriminatory practice involves “subjective discipline”—imparted by teachers and motivated by implicit bias. For example, the concept of “disrespect” is inherently subjective. In fact, “disrespect” is in the eye of the beholder and difficult to prove. If one student receives no

consequences for a conflict, when another student receives all of the consequences, implicit bias may play a role. Previous research suggests that not only are disciplinary techniques negatively associated with educational outcomes, but may also target students of color, whether explicitly or implicitly (Casella, 2003; Monroe, 2005; Perry & Morris, 2014).

The literature is clear that Black and Brown students, particularly males, are subjected to differential discipline. Recent literature reveals how Black girls are uniquely impacted: what types of behavioral sanctions are leveled against Black girls, and how the disciplining of Black girls pertains to their non-adherence to traditional female (and white) gender norms (Arango, 2014; Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darenbourg, 2010; George, 2015; Morris, & Perry, 2017; Morris, 2007; Slate, Gray, & Jones, 2016; Wun, 2016). What is less clear is the scope of this problem nationally. The gap in this research lies in the paucity of national longitudinal data analysis to inform scholars and practitioners how serious of an issue school pushout is for Black girls. With this paper, we attempt to fill this gap.

In this study, we will examine whether discipline techniques that target African American girls, such as suspensions and informal pushouts, lead these girls to eventually drop out of school. We know that 7% of African American girls drop out, compared to 3.8% of White girls (Morris, 2016). Thus, we seek to determine whether the over-disciplining of African American girls leads to eventual school dropout. Are African American girls who are suspended and subjected to other more informal pushout policies more apt to leave school on their own?

Theoretical Context

“It’s not who you attend school with but who controls the school you attend.”—Nikki Giovanni

We investigate this topic through an intersectional feminist critical race lens (Crenshaw, 1993), paying particular attention to the intersectional identities of African American girls and their unique experiences in schools. According to Morris (2016), “Black girls are routinely expected to seamlessly reconcile their status as Black *and* female *and* poor, a status that has left them with a mark of double jeopardy that fuels intense discrimination and personal vulnerability” (p. 23). Our intersectional feminist critical race lens necessitates a critique of the institutions that ignore, seek to correct, discipline, and criminalize African American girl aesthetics and identities. This lens also allows for the interrogation of social, educational, and political factors that impact this current reality (Chapman, 2007), the end goal of which is social justice (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Our intersectional feminist critical race lens seeks to determine how oppression is perpetuated, for the purposes of undermining all forms of bias within systems and institutions. Dismantling White (and other forms of) privilege is a necessary component of this mission.

Methods

Data Source

These data come from the second follow-up of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS, 2002). It is the most recent data collection from the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) concerning high school level students. NCES compiled a list of all schools in the United States that included a 10th grade and selected a random sample of 800 of these schools to participate in the study. From these schools, up to thirty 10th graders were selected at random to be participants for the full study. We used the public-use data file for all analyses.

Sample Described

The full data set consisted of 16,197 students, of which 7,717 were female. This sample was again reduced to only those students identified exclusively as Black/African American or White. In this final analytic sample of only African American or White girls, the total sample size was 5,611, of which 21.8% of the sample were African American and the remaining 78.2% were White.

These girls ranged from 15 to 19 years of age, with the mean age of 16.4 years ($SD = 0.55$). Fifty-eight percent of the analytic sample lived with both mother and father. Thirteen percent of the families reported an annual family income of \$20,000 or less (poverty level for a family of four in 2002), while 15.9% of the families reported an annual family income of more than \$100,000 a year.

Measures

The primary predictor for this study was whether the student was Black/African American or White. This dichotomous measure had an overall distribution for this sample of 21.8% Black/African American and 78.2% White. This study examined three outcome measures - whether the child had been held back (reported by the parent), a composite of teacher reports of student disruption, and the school's record of whether the student had completed high school.

The covariates considered in this study fell into three domains: (1) parent/family covariates, (2) school covariates, and (3) teacher covariates. For parent and family characteristics, we examined a composite of the parent's own report of problem behaviors and a standardized composite of various components of a family's socioeconomic status. The focus of school characteristics was a composite of items measuring school problems, such as the amount of trash observed, the noise level, observable disrepair of the building, and graffiti in and outside the classroom and the school. The focus on teacher characteristics concerned the quality of the teacher who made the report of problem behaviors about the students: (1) education level, (2) years' experience, (3) the amount of training in his/her field, and (4) their response to an item asking, "If you were starting over, would you be a teacher again?" to measure more difficulty or disillusionment with teaching.

Analyses

For both outcomes observed in 10th grade, we examined first the overall comparison between African American and White girls, then added alternate explanations in the following order: parent report of school problems, socioeconomic status, school quality problems as reported by an external observer, and teacher quality elements. These models were adjusted to retain only significant covariates. In each stage, we focused on the significance of the change in variance explained and on the amount of change observed in the Black-versus-White comparison of the outcome.

For the final outcome of high school graduation, following the overall comparison of African American and White girls' rates, we added the full set of covariate measures, then added whether or not the student had been retained a grade up through 10th-grade, and finally added the teachers' report of problem behaviors at school. In each stage, we were interested in both the amount of reduction in the difference in rates between African American and White girls, as well as the impact of the additional components on the overall model.

Results Concerning Push Out at the High School Level

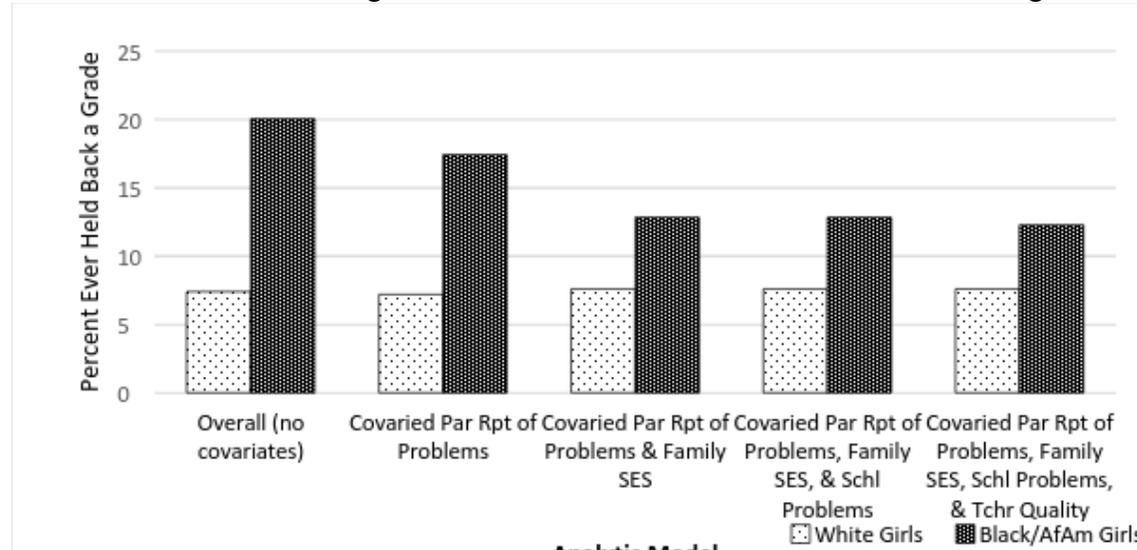
For this cohort of students, we were interested in the experiences of the girls in their 10th grade classroom, as well as their history of being held back in school. We used the second

follow-up file to consider the impact of these factors, as well as the covariates, with respect to the outcome of a student not having completed high school. We address each area separately.

Student Retention History through Tenth Grade

As described above, we analyzed differences by race in whether the student was ever held back after taking other explanatory factors into account. Figure 1 shows the difference translated from the logistic regression coefficient back to the percent held back for each group, adjusted at each stage by other covariates in the analysis.

Figure 1. Results of sequential logistic regression analyses testing the difference between the estimated likelihood of being held back for Black/African American and White girls.

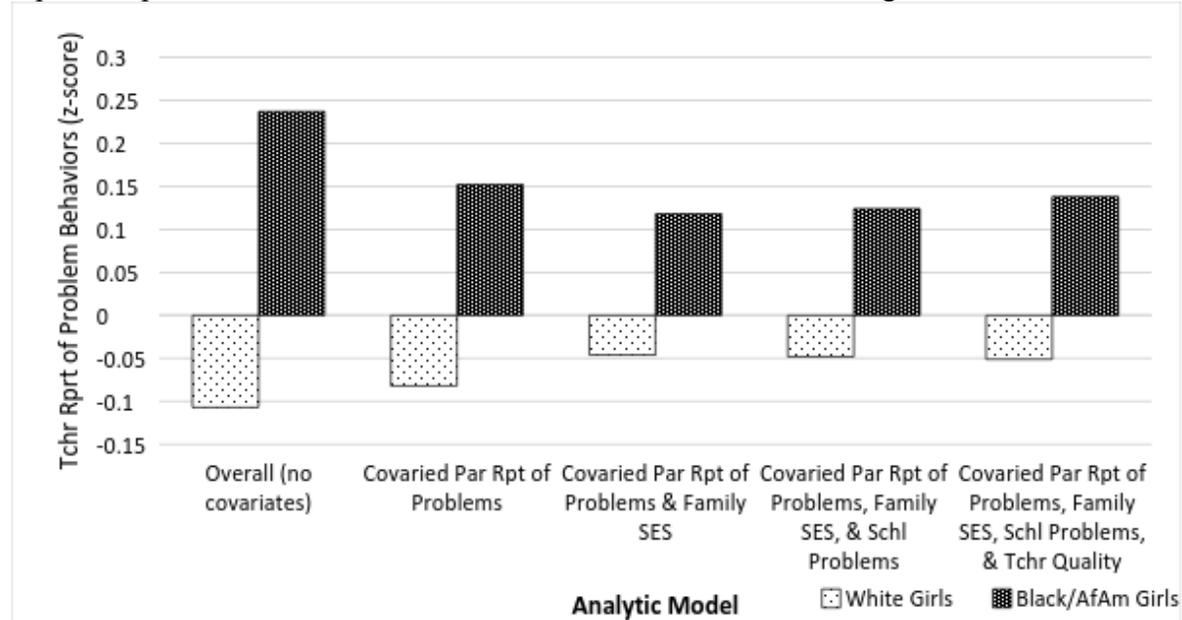


Being held back a grade was a strong predictor of eventual dropping out of school and, as such, is a historical indicator of the kinds of “push-out” forces experienced by these girls. These results demonstrate that African American girls were much more likely to be held back a grade compared to White girls. Even at the most reduced level of comparison (Model 5), African American girls were more than twice as likely as White girls to have been held back at least once by the time they reached 10th grade.

Teacher Reports of Problem Behaviors

As described in the methods section above, the overall difference was examined relative to the addition of other explanatory factors. As each variable in the analysis was significantly related to the outcome, the focus for these results rests on the comparison of Black/ African American and White girls. Figure 2 shows the pattern of these differences.

Figure 2. Results of hierarchical regression analyses testing the difference between teacher reports of problem behavior for Black/African American and White girls.

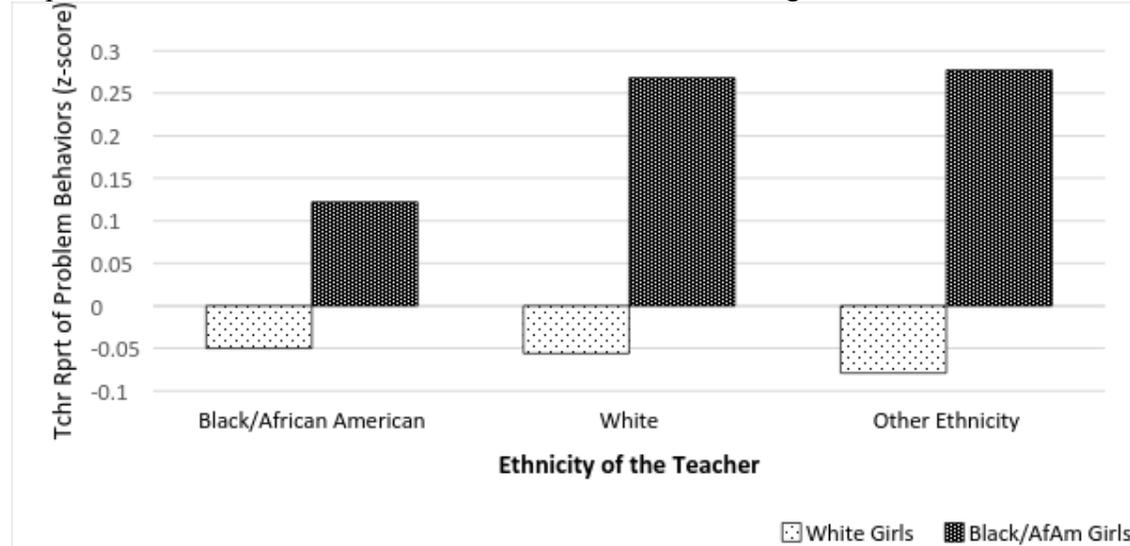


The central observation in these results is the striking difference in level of problem behaviors reported by teachers between these two groups of girls. Even after controlling for the parents' report of the same behaviors, the teachers still report much higher problem levels for African American girls in their classrooms. In addition, of the five areas of covariates, both school problems and teacher quality did not have the theorized impact of an alternate explanation – both sets of measures instead increased the difference in problem behaviors reported by teachers for these two groups of girls.

The other element of interest in this comparison was whether the difference in teacher reports of problem behavior might also differ based on the ethnicity of the teacher. In this analysis, the teacher's racial group was reduced to Black/African American, White, or Other. This analysis did reveal a significant interaction between the race of the teacher and that of the student ($F_{(1,4001)} = 5.91, p < .05$). The adjusted means for the groups are shown in Figure 3. In this analysis, the means have also been adjusted for the significant covariates in the last model provided above.

While teachers' reports of White girls' problem behavior were quite similar, there were differences in the shift reported for African American girls' problems, with Black/ African American teachers giving a significantly lower report than either White teachers or teachers of other races. However, there was still a sizeable difference, with teachers reporting significantly higher problem levels for African American girls compared to White girls, even after adjusting for alternate explanations.

Figure 3. Results testing the difference between teachers of different ethnic backgrounds' reports of problem behavior for Black/African American and White girls.

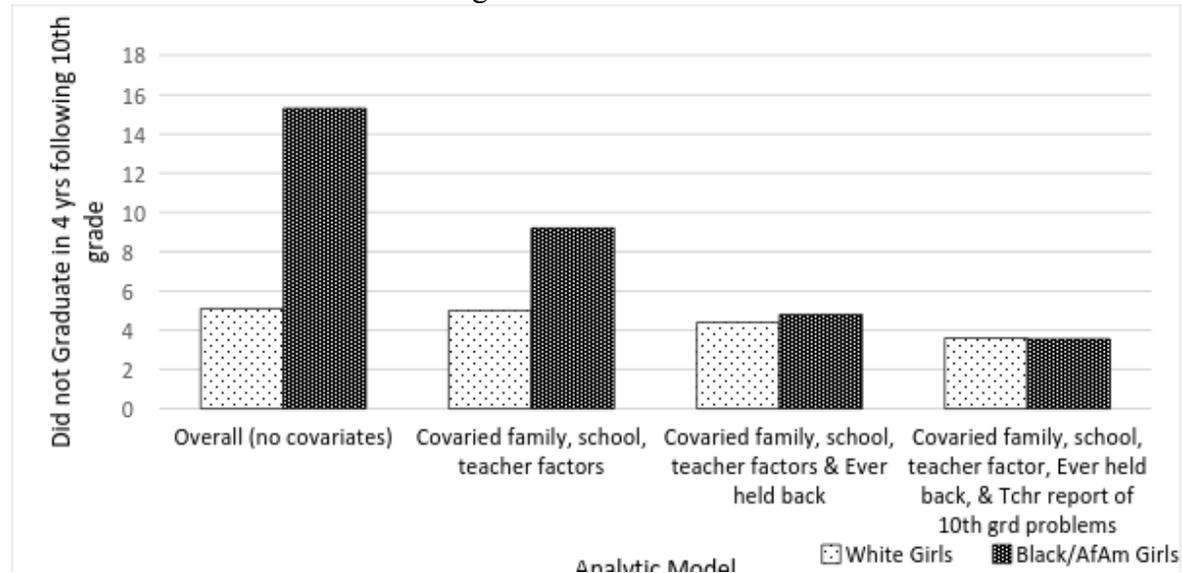


Differences in Failure to Complete High School

As described in the methods section, the second follow-up of the ELS:2002 data set included an indication as to whether the student had completed high school in the four years following their 10th grade year. We used the outcomes from the previous two analyses, combined with the covariates listed in the final model, to compare students' completion rates for high school within four years of 10th grade. For these analyses, we used the final model covariates from the previous analysis as the first added layer, the student's history of retention added to these as the second, and teachers' reports of problem behaviors as the third, giving only four models instead of five.

With no other factors under consideration, African American girls failed to graduate from high school within four years of their 10th grade year at a rate that was almost three times higher than that experienced by White girls. The inclusion of background factors reduced the difference to about double the rate ($p < .001$). However, controlling for whether the girl had been held back up through tenth grade and then teachers' reports of problem behavior reduced the difference between these two groups to insignificance ($p = .978$). This finding indicates that the pattern of characteristics that contribute to African American girls being held back more, and experiencing higher levels of teacher-reported problems in their 10th grade classrooms completely accounted for an overall 300% difference in these students dropping out of high school. It is, in essence, the definition of being pushed out of school.

Figure 4. Results of sequential logistic regression analyses testing the difference between the estimated likelihood of not graduating from high school within four years of tenth grade for Black/African American and White girls.



Discussion and Conclusions

As the literature suggests, these analyses confirm that Black girls have a significantly higher risk of being subjected to differential disciplining and eventual school pushout than do their White counterparts. In sum, Black girls failed to graduate from high school within four years of their 10th grade year at a rate that was almost three times higher than White girls. The subversive pattern of teacher behaviors and school policies that contribute to Black girls being held back more, and experiencing higher levels of teacher-reported problems in their 10th-grade classrooms, completely accounted for an overall 300% difference in Black girls being pushed out of high school.

These disturbing results must serve as a call for policymakers to rethink gendered policies and programs that focus primarily on boys and minimize the social exclusion and pushout from schools that is the reality for all too many Black girls in schools today. Likewise, these results must be used as guidance in teacher education programs. Teacher candidates, most of whom are White and female, must be challenged to confront their own implicit race-based biases before they are allowed to play out in schools. Finally, these results must be used in professional development sessions for in-service teachers. Current hegemonic teaching and curricular practices must be dismantled so that subjective misinterpretations of critical cultural, linguistic, and behavioral patterns may be revealed. We hereby call for the inclusion of feminist intersectionality and culturally responsive pedagogical practices in preservice teacher education training and in-service professional development.

References

- African American Policy Forum. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced, and underprotected*. New York, NY: Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies.
- Arango Ricks, S. (2014). Falling through the cracks: Black girls and education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 4(1), 10-21.

- Black, D. W. (2016). *Ending zero tolerance: The crisis of absolute school discipline*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Blake, J. J., Butler, B. R., Lewis, C. W., & Darenbourg, A. (2010). Unmasking the inequitable discipline experiences of urban black girls: Implications for urban educational stakeholders. *Urban Review, 43*(90), 90-106.
- Casella, R. (2003, November). Punishing dangerousness through preventive detention: Illustrating the institutional link between school and prison. *New Directions for Youth Development. Special Issue: Deconstructing the School-to-Prison Pipeline, 99*, 55-70.
- Chapman, T. K. (2007). Interrogating classroom relationships and events: using portraiture and critical race theory in education research. *Educational Researcher, 36*(3), 156-162.
- Crenshaw, K. (1993). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241-1299.
- DeCuir, J. T., & Dixson, A. D. (2004, June/July). "So when it comes out, they aren't surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher, 33*, 26-31.
- George, J. A. (2015). Stereotype and school pushout: Race, gender, and discipline disparities. *Arkansas Law Review, 68*(101), 101-129.
- Goff, P. A., Jackson, M. C., Di Leone, B. A. L., Culotta, C. M., & DiTomasso, N. A. (2014). The essence of innocence: Consequences of dehumanizing black children. *Journal of personality and social psychology*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/psp-a0035663.pdf>.
- Heitzeb, N. A. (2016). *The school-to-prison pipeline: Education, discipline, and racialized double standards*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Lee, C. D. (2003). Why we need to re-think race and ethnicity in educational research. *Educational Researcher, 32*(5), 3-5.
- Lewis, C. W., Butler, B. R., Bonner, I. I., Fred, A., & Joubert, M. (2010). African American male discipline patterns and school district responses resulting impact on academic achievement: Implications for urban educators and policy makers. *Journal of African American Males in Education, 1*(1), 7-25.
- Lickel, B., Schmader, T., & Hamilton, D. L. (2003). A case of collective responsibility: Who else was to blame for the Columbine High School shootings? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 29*(2), 194-204.
- Milner, H. R. (2013). Analyzing poverty, learning, and teaching through a critical race theory lens. *Review of Research in Education, 37*, 1-53.
- Monroe, C. R. (2005). Why are "bad boys" always black? Causes of disproportionality in school discipline and recommendations for change. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 79*(1), 45-50.
- Morris, E. W., & Perry, B. L. (2017). Girls behaving badly?: Race, gender, and subjective evaluation in the discipline of African American girls. *Sociology of Education, 90*(2), 127-148.
- Morris, E. W. (2007). "Ladies or loudies?" Perceptions and experiences of black girls in classrooms. *Youth & Society, 38*(4), 490-515.
- Morris, M. W. (2016). *Pushout: The criminalization of black girls in schools*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- National Center of Education Statistics (ND). *Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002)*

- Policy and Research Issues*, retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov>.
- O'Connor, C., & Fernandez, S. D. (2006). Race, class, and disproportionality: Reevaluating the relationship between poverty and special education placement. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 6-11.
- Orfield, G., & Frankenberg, E. (2004, Spring). "Where are we now?" *Teaching Tolerance*. Southern Poverty Law Center.
- Penner, A. M., & Saperstein, A. (2013). Engendering racial perceptions: An intersectional analysis of how social status shapes race. *Gender & Society*, 27(3), 319-344.
- Perry, B. L., & Morris, E. W. (2014). Suspending progress collateral consequences of exclusionary punishment in public schools. *American Sociological Review*, 79(6), 1067-1087.
- Sharma, A., Joyner, A. M., & Osment, A. (2014). Adverse impact of racial isolation on student performance: A study in North Carolina. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 22(14).
- Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The color of discipline: Sources of racial and gender disproportionality in school punishment. *The Urban Review*, 34(4), 317-342.
- Slate, J. R., Gray, P. L., & Jones, B. (2016). A clear lack of equity in disciplinary consequences for black girls in Texas: A statewide examination. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 85(3), 250-260.
- Spencer, J. P. (2012). "Cultural deprivation" to cultural capital: The roots and continued relevance of compensatory education. *Teachers College Record*, 114(6), 1-5.
- Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(5), 797-811.
- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2014). Civil rights data collection data snapshot: School discipline. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/crdc-discipline-snapshot.pdf>.
- Woodson, C. G. (1933). *The mis-education of the negro*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers.
- Wun, C. (2016). Unaccounted foundations: Black girls, anti-black racism, and punishment in schools. *Critical Sociology*, 42(405), 737-750.
- Zion, S.D. & Blanchett, W. (2011). (Re)conceptualizing inclusion: Can critical race theory and interest convergence be utilized to achieve inclusion and equity for African American students? *Teachers College Record*, 113(10), 2186-2205.