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REPORT



## “Expect to Be Taken Out of Class”: Comparing School Experiences of Trauma-Exposed Black Girls and Boys

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the intersections of race, gender, and trauma in students' school experiences. We collected focus group data from 36 trauma-exposed Black girls and 10 trauma-exposed Black boys from two urban high schools. Data was analyzed using an intersectional framework and resulted in the following themes: (1) Don't Touch the Students; (2) You Gettin' Suspended; (3) You Supposed to Be the Bigger Person; and (4) If We Have a Uniform, They Should Have a Uniform. Implications are discussed.

### KEYWORDS

Black youth; education equity; intersectionality; social justice; urban education

Experiencing trauma as an adolescent is not uncommon, as approximately three million children have a substantiated maltreatment report each year, and many more children who are abused or neglected go unreported (Paccione-Dyszlewski, 2016). Psychological trauma occurs when an individual witnesses or personally encounters one or multiple real or perceived threats to their physical or emotional safety and responds with significant fear, horror, and/or helplessness (Nooner et al., 2012). Not only does trauma exposure occur with greater frequency during adolescence, but teens also experience nearly double the rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of adults (Breslau et al., 2004; Nooner et al., 2012). This may be due, in part, to the tenuous nature of coping with trauma during adolescence, when cognitive, social, and emotional capacities are still developing and less stable social networks exist (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Nooner et al., 2012).

Racial/ethnic minority youth in urban (i.e., more densely populated/inner-city) environments are particularly vulnerable, as they are more likely to experience trauma due to higher rates of community poverty, drug use, and crime in urban and low-income environments (Alim et al., 2006). The disproportionate distribution of trauma and toxic stress in disadvantaged communities is a contributor to the persistence of poor health outcomes (Wade et al., 2014) in these communities. Researchers attribute much of this disadvantage to systemic issues of oppression and social injustice (Caldwell et al., 2004, 2006).

## Intersections of Gender, Race, and Trauma in School Settings

Similar to racial/ethnic background, gender can play a tremendous role in the prevalence of and responses to trauma that youth experience. For example, female youth are more likely to experience victimization, especially forms of sexual abuse (Sedlak et al., 2010). After experiencing trauma, neurobiological differences occur in girls and boys that necessitate analyzing PTSD symptoms within the context of gender (Craig & Sprang, 2014). For example, the sympathetic and noradrenergic systems that mediate the human fight-or-flight responses are activated differentially in boys and girls when confronted with dangerous or traumatic situations (Sherin & Nemeroff, 2011; Southwick et al., 1999). Studies also found that females are more likely to express affiliative emotion (i.e., feelings related to social and emotional connections to others) and display less anger and aggression than males (Craig & Sprang, 2014; Kimerling et al., 2002). In response to trauma, females tend to develop more internalizing symptoms, while males tend to externalize and exhibit aggressive behavior (Maschi et al., 2008). These differences in emotional response result in female youth experiencing higher rates of PTSD than males (Kessler et al., 1995). Additionally, female youth have been documented to be at greater risk for experiencing PTSD-related cognitions following trauma exposure (Craig & Sprang, 2014; Ma et al., 2011). Children create schemas for determining appropriate male and female behavior based on social learning, socialization, and experience with adversity (Craig & Sprang, 2014). This socialization as well as societal gender roles may have a profound influence on a child's expression of traumatic stress, responses to adversity, and manifestations of PTSD-related symptoms.

Not only are girls in low-income areas especially vulnerable to extreme levels of trauma due to various forms of victimization and toxic stress (Morris, 2014), but their subsequent behaviors—often the result of traumatic triggers in the classroom—are commonly misinterpreted by school staff (Oehlberg, 2008; Richardson et al., 2012). Furthermore, these behaviors are often interpreted through the lens of racial bias. General misconceptions about the behavior of students of color, along with racial biases, often impact school disciplinary decisions (Gavazzi et al., 2009), leading to the criminalization of Black girls' behavior, rather than implementation of effective interventions (Morris, 2014, 2018; Vafa et al., 2018). For example, language used in urban school settings supports further criminalization of racial/ethnic minority students. In 2015, Kayama et al. found that African American students and their school staff overwhelmingly used legal terminology (e.g., infraction, crime, self-defense) to describe students, student behavior, and the school environment, further highlighting the current trend toward criminalizing youth in education environments.

This intersection of race and gender can present many distinct impediments for Black girls as they navigate a perilous social landscape wrought with systemic barriers to their academic success. For example, the rate of school suspension among Black girls is gravely disproportionate from the rates of suspension among their white counterparts, and higher than all other races (United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). In fact, while Black males are suspended more in total, Black girls experience more disproportionality; Black males have triple the suspension rate of white males, but Black girls are suspended six times as often as white females (Crenshaw et al., 2015; United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Such school challenges and exclusionary school discipline (i.e., suspension, expulsion, zero-tolerance) often lead to entanglements with juvenile correctional settings, making Black girls the fastest-growing

population in the juvenile justice system—33.2% of girls in the juvenile justice system are Black, while only representing 14% of the general population (Saar et al., 2015). Research demonstrates how exclusionary school discipline has counterproductive and criminalizing effects and often further marginalizes the most vulnerable students (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Gavazzi et al., 2009). Still, exclusionary discipline continues to be inequitably enforced on Black girls, and their presence in the juvenile justice system continues to grow (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2018)—often for less serious behaviors (Pasko, 2010; Watson & Edelman, 2012).

Unaddressed childhood trauma—like that experienced by criminalized Black girls—causes a wide array of severe behavioral and emotional consequences (Gerrity & Folcarelli, 2008). Traumatic stress can significantly impact students' functioning in school (Cole et al., 2005), as adverse childhood experiences can affect students' cognitive processing, concentration, classroom behavior, socioemotional well-being (Cook et al., 2005), and even physical and mental health (Anda et al., 2006). Research has shown the overwhelming price of youth trauma exposure and recommended delivery of evidence-based early intervention and prevention services for trauma-exposed youth through child-serving systems (Mendelson et al., 2015). However, there is only a small body of research and a dearth of programs and policies to address the needs of Black girls in schools, rendering their plight as virtually invisible (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

## The Present Study

Research has begun to explore the nuanced experiences of trauma-exposed youth in schools (Day et al., 2015; Morris, 2014; West et al., 2014). Still, there has not been work to date that has compared the experiences of Black girls with their male counterparts in these spaces. An intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1991) can assist in exploring the mechanisms that contribute to disproportionality among Black girls by elucidating the distinctions in how young Black girls make sense of their school environment in comparison to young Black boys. This framework can also assist in examining the complexity of these interwoven identities—race and gender—and how Black girls conceptualize themselves in their school setting. Additionally, an intersectional lens can isolate specific ways in which power structures in schools are acting on these young people, providing Black girls with the opportunity to address the ways in which social change is needed in their school environments.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Black, trauma-exposed male and female students in order to address the following research question: How do the intersections of race, gender, and trauma background inform the school experiences of traumatized Black girls? We believe that having students' perspective on their lived experiences in school could provide invaluable insight into what students' value and disregard about their school experience in order to improve their chances for academic success.

## Methods

The sample consisted of 36 Black female students and 10 Black male students enrolled between September 2015 and June 2016 at two public charter high schools, located in an urban Midwestern metropolitan area. Consistent with the surrounding community, the schools'

student populations are predominantly African American and come from households with lower socioeconomic status. School administrators assisted with recruitment of a purposive sampling of students who had self-reported histories of trauma and traumatic stress. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old and across grades 9 through 12.

### **Data Collection**

This study consists of a secondary analysis of data obtained from focus groups held during the 2015–2016 school year. An institutional review board at a local university approved the study. School administrators obtained informed consent/assent from students to participate in the focus group during the school registration process. We used a semi-structured interview protocol to identify youth perceptions of their school environment, how their school setting impacted their mood and behaviors, as well as the ways in which their school could be improved. Each focus group was single-gendered, convened in a designated school classroom, and lasted for approximately 1 hour.

### **Data Analysis**

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were coded independently by the first and second author, using reflexive bracketing for confirmability and extensive memo writing. Researchers then confirmed the reliability of the coding through consensus (Padgett, 2008) and organized themes using constant comparison methods based on content similarities and main ideas (Dye et al., 2000). This study used In Vivo coding, which codes the direct language of the participants as codes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases (Saldaña, 2009). Therefore, the analysis was grounded in the voices of the student participants. Regarding researcher positionality, coding and interpretation of the focus group data was conducted by one African American male researcher (i.e., a doctoral student in the field of social work) and one African American female researcher (i.e., an assistant professor in the field of social work) who have either directly or indirectly had experiences similar to those described by the participants of this study.

### **Findings**

Participants described their lived experiences in their school environment, and 54 different codes emerged from their descriptions. Findings from the female student focus group data demonstrated both commonalities with and distinctions from the male student focus group data. Through the analysis, the 54 codes were interpreted as four main themes: (1) Don't Touch the Students; (2) You Gettin' Suspended; (3) You Supposed to Be the Bigger Person; and (4) If We Have a Uniform, They Should Have a Uniform.

#### **Theme 1: Don't Touch the Students**

Both male and female participants reported instances of teachers, school staff, or peers physically touching them or invading their personal space. Participants described this as being a significant trigger that often exacerbated their emotional state. For example, while describing

factors that negatively affected her mood in school, one female participant reported, “When people touch me ... yeah. I hate that. That’s dirty. He [the teacher] just touches everybody. He is so annoying.” Another student described how even unintended touch during hallway exchanges can be anxiety-inducing:

When I go in the hallway, like, I will start freaking out if people touch me. Like, these hallways get really crowded and I feel like that’s my most hard moment because if somebody wanted to really bother me, all they would have to do is get all up on me in the hallway. At this point, I’m probably upset. Definitely coming out of [the teacher’s classroom] and we gotta cross right directly across to get to the math class. And, like, you know when you waiting by the lockers—everybody get around you, and I literally wanna cry at that point, because it’s like too many people.

Given the limited space available during hallway exchanges, this moment during the school day created real fears related to potentially triggering student interactions between class time. Similarly, even when the touch was meant to be soothing, male participants perceived it as triggering. One student described the discomfort of having teachers attempt to console them by getting physically close. He asserted, “Don’t touch the students. Don’t make students feel uncomfortable by getting in their personal space.”

Male and female participants also expressed frustration with peers when they crossed physical space boundaries or verbally intruded on a situation when they were upset. One female student stated, “I just hate when people ask what’s wrong over and over.” Another student described:

I like the sympathy or empathy or whatever, but I don’t want a lot of people to be like, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong? Are you okay?” I don’t like that, I just don’t want to be talked to when I’m mad and stuff. I don’t like people asking, “What’s wrong?”

Similarly, when asked about factors that worsen their emotional state in school, one male student replied, “When people ask you the same thing ... when everybody crowds around you ... when you, like, just want personal space and that’s basically it.” Overall, regardless of gender, participants identified that having their physical space or emotional boundaries infringed upon by school staff or other students created an additional trigger that could make their mood worse during their school day.

## ***Theme 2: You Gettin’ Suspended***

Male and female students also commonly reported themes related to over-discipline (i.e., excessive use of suspension and expulsion as a first resort). Regardless of gender, participants described experiences of being disregarded by teachers and administrators when having negative emotional moments in the classroom, as well as being threatened with suspension or expulsion on a regular basis. One female participant discussed an encounter with a school administrator, explaining: “She walked in ... and she said, ‘I don’t care if there’s only two students in this school ... if you don’t want to come here [to school] the way I want you to come here, I will kick you out.’” Female participants described these experiences of over-discipline—and the threat of suspension/expulsion—as antagonistic. Another student described her experience in the classroom, stating:

If she [the teacher] look at you the wrong way, expect to be taken out of class the next hour. She [the teacher] talkin’ ‘bout, ‘you gettin’ suspended’ or ‘you gettin’ expelled ... what you do this

for?’ I don’t understand why she [the teacher] just gotta use her authority like that because it’s not even that serious.”

Male participants also described experiences of being over-disciplined or disregarded when they experienced difficult emotional moments in school. For example, one student stated, “Most of the time they [teachers] don’t care.” Another student agreed with this statement and added how teachers continue with their lesson plan, overlooking students’ emotional moments in class. He said, “They [teachers] just want you to do your work. ... Most teachers they’ll just teach—teach you the same way that they was before you was mad.” As an alternative, one student suggested, “Listen to the students and don’t just go straight to the phone call ... ‘gotta get suspended.”” Overwhelmingly, participants felt that teachers used suspension and other punitive tactics as a first resort.

### ***Theme 3: You Supposed to Be the Bigger Person***

Both male and female participants reported contentious relationships with their teachers, which impacted their behavior and performance in the classroom. One of the major contributors to these relationship challenges was over-discipline, as aforementioned in theme two. However, the other major dynamic that created this contention was reported differently between male and female students. Male students described their teachers’ instructional methods as a major challenge in student–teacher relationships. They reported that teachers used methods that were out-of-touch, conveying content in ways that did not seem relevant to students’ everyday lives. One participant described one of their teachers, stating: “She goes back to ... I don’t wanna necessarily say the old days, but she has a teaching method ... that’s not updated.” They also reported having confrontations with their teachers because they did not feel that the work was fair or well explained, as one male student stated: “They make stuff harder than what it is.” Another student elaborated, “Or they give us unnecessary work. Yeah, like if we done with like, if they hand out a worksheet we get done with that ... they’ll hand out another worksheet.” Then, male participants discussed alternatives to these methods. For example, one participant stated: “I’d say, one, not just give them the intelligence; the math or whatever. Give them the wisdom with it. Like, tell them ... what do you do with this? You know?” They suggested that teachers use better instructional techniques, such as more opportunities for group work, more technology in the classroom, less “busy work,” and explanations of the content that were relevant to students.

On the other hand, female participants attributed their contention with teachers to being directly verbally disrespected by teachers. They cited instances of teachers inserting themselves into and instigating student “drama.” They also explained how their teachers—particularly female teachers—verbally challenged them in ways that were extremely harmful. For example, one participant stated, “Ms. D be cussing people’s life out, talking about ‘You a hoe’ ... They want respect from us, but they don’t give it. And I’m like, no.” Another participant explained:

Like they talk to us like how people talk to people in the streets ... how she’d [the teacher] be like, “Step up to me if you got a problem. What’s up?” And stuff like that. Like, you’re not supposed to—you is a principal. You supposed to talk to people with respect. I mean, some of these kids do have a smart mouth in here, but you supposed to be the bigger person because you are grown.

These occurrences of feeling verbally disrespected generally resulted in female students’ behavior escalating in the classroom.

#### ***Theme 4: If We Have a Uniform, They Should Have a Uniform***

One theme consistently occurred in the female student focus groups but was not reported during the male student focus group: clothing surveillance. Female participants perceived teachers to be hyper-focused on their attire and extremely punitive toward them for minor infractions related to their clothing. They reported that their uniform attire was expensive to purchase and that many of them could not afford the particular brand required by the school. Still, these participants reported being suspended or threatened with suspension for up to 2 weeks due to clothing infractions, such as wearing the wrong brand of pants or the wrong length of skirt. One student describes the attire, stating, “Yeah, and they cost like \$30 a pair for a pair of pants ... I can’t even afford the sweaters.” Another student explains:

If we’ve got some [generic] black pants and a white shirt, that should be OK. They’re making us pay the \$40 for [a particular brand of] pants and a shirt. ... Ties—our tie on my shirt was \$45. Then, they want us to go and spend another \$40 on one pair of pants and one shirt ... like, how you gonna turn somebody away from their education just because they can’t afford a certain type of uniform pants?

Interestingly, male participants did not address clothing-related issues or punishments related to their physical appearance in school.

In turn, female participants spent a considerable amount of time during the focus group discussing the attire of the female teachers at the school, including the school principal. They provided several descriptions of female teaching staff, critiquing these staff members’ clothing choices as “unprofessional” and “inappropriate”:

These teachers do not have a uniform. I feel like if we have a uniform, they should have a uniform attire as well. They say our dresses and skirts and shirts need to be knee length. She [the school principal] be walking around this boy with her dress all the way up here [pointing to upper thigh].

However, their critique did not extend to the male teaching staff in the school. Additionally, the male participants did not address the clothing choices of their teachers or school staff.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to use an intersectional framework to examine the intersections of race, gender, and trauma background and how they inform the school experiences of traumatized Black girls. Focus group data illustrated multiple similarities in the lived experiences of trauma-exposed Black girls and boys in school settings. However, there were notable distinctions identified as well. Specifically, theme 1 identified challenges that both Black boys and girls encounter with being physically touched by school staff and peers. This is not surprising and confirms previous findings on the experiences of trauma-exposed students. Research shows that traumatized youth have difficulty with physical touch, particularly when it has been initiated—even with positive intentions—by someone with whom a strong, positive relationship is lacking (Crosby et al., [accepted](#)). Given the nature of psychological trauma and the ways in which it can impact trust, attachment, and interpersonal connection, it is understandable that unsolicited physical touch might be perceived as intrusive.



Additionally, in theme 2, over-discipline was described by both male and female students. Again, these findings are not surprising, given the current statistics on disproportionality in suspension/expulsion of Black youth (Gavazzi et al., 2009; United States Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Research has often attributed this over-discipline to misinterpretations of the behavior of traumatized students (Oehlberg, 2008) as well as racial misconceptions and biases that contribute to criminalizing Black students (Gavazzi et al., 2009; Morris, 2014, 2018; Vafa et al., 2018). While these dynamics are certainly well supported in the literature as a contributor to over-discipline, our findings further unpack the ways in which these dynamics play out relationally. Both male and female students voiced experiences where teachers reverted to threats of suspension or other punitive actions, rather than engaging them relationally and supportively when they were struggling in class.

Theme 3 illustrates the nuanced differences between Black girls and boys in this school setting. Our findings demonstrate the ways in which student–teacher relationships may be impacted by student gender. In addition to over-discipline, Black boys described academic and instructional issues as a source of challenge with their teachers, where classwork seems irrelevant to real-world learning and is perceived as a means to simply keep them occupied throughout the class period. On the other hand, Black girls’ student–teacher issues were more relational in nature, where teachers used confrontation, verbal escalation, and even name-calling (in some cases) to challenge female students in ways that they did not challenge male students. Findings suggest that teachers seem to view Black girls as a “safe threat”: They may verbally denigrate a Black girl who is experiencing a difficult moment in class because they might be perceived as less of a physical threat than a Black boy. Students do not perceive the teachers as particularly sensitive to the ways in which female students can be further triggered by teacher responses. Unfortunately, teachers are not usually trained on navigating trauma, which is a huge gap in their professional development, particularly for those going into schools with these populations of youth.

Furthermore, in theme 4, findings suggest that Black girls’ bodies are being policed in school settings. The policing of the female students’ physical appearances results in students internalizing these norms about the ways that society may critique a woman’s attire and physical appearance in public spaces. Trauma-exposed Black girls internalize their gender socialization (Craig & Sprang, 2014) as well as many of the messages they are receiving in school. This is important to note because research has shown that female youth are more likely to experience sexual forms of victimization (Sedlak et al., 2010), which compounds the way that they perceive themselves and their overall value in both academic spaces and elsewhere.

Overall, each of these themes provides a more nuanced look into the ways in which these trauma-exposed Black male and female students experienced their school environment. At the heart of these experiences, our findings would suggest some important commonalities in relation to student gender and school experience (i.e., wanting respect for physical and personal boundaries, decreased use of suspension, etc.). Still, at the intersection of race, gender, and trauma background, some clear distinctions emerged (e.g., critiques about female attire), which has implications for the ways in which Black girls are able to physically show up in school spaces as well as how they internalize beliefs about themselves and other women as well.

## Implications

The findings from this study have several policy and practice implications for schools. First, teacher training (preservice and in-service professional development) to increase culturally responsive student empowerment approaches in schools should be prioritized, which may help teachers and administrators identify common triggers for students who have experienced trauma and implement school-wide practices on how to address trauma when it manifests in the school setting. Examples of trauma-informed professional development training that currently exists that could be adopted by schools include the Neurosequential Model, Multiplying Connections, Making Space for Learning, and Compassionate Teaching (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; Perry, 2009; Walkley & Cox, 2013; Wolpov et al., 2009). Additional work is needed, however, to modify these existing curricula to ensure they are culturally responsive. Second, schools should consider implementing restorative justice practices. Restorative justice involves a partnership between students and school staff and intentionally searches for the most appropriate method of discipline, instead of immediately resorting to suspension or expulsion (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012). Third, any training implemented for school teachers and staff should focus on the nuances of intersectionality as well as the unique experiences of Black girls in school settings. Fourth, recruitment and retention of teachers of color is imperative. Research demonstrates that when the demographics of students and teachers are similar, student suspension rates decline (Dee, 2004). A diverse teaching force may help improve cultural responsiveness within a school and lead to a more supportive environment for students of color. These policy options should all be considered together, as schools will need to implement a multifaceted approach to supporting young Black girls who have experienced trauma.

The passage of the Patients and Communities Act (HR6), which was signed into law in October 2018 includes significant resources for increasing trauma-informed practices in schools. Specifically, this bill authorized \$50 million for each fiscal year 2019 through 2023 in grants for use in educational settings. There are a number of ways these grants can be used to allow for states and local education authorities to tailor their programs to fit each district's unique culture and needs. The law also requires the engagement of families and communities in efforts to increase awareness of child and youth trauma, including individuals who have contact with large numbers of youth on a regular basis such as teachers, physicians, juvenile justice workers, and mental health professionals.

## Limitations

It is important to note several limitations of this study. First, our sample sizes were not equal in regard to gender. There were 36 female participants and 10 male participants, which may have impacted our findings. Next, we were not able to explore students' experiences outside of the school setting. This information may have also influenced our findings in specific ways but was outside of the scope of this study. Additionally, we were not able to explore students' specific trauma histories. We recognize that specific types of trauma may elicit particular responses and perceptions among our participants and that understanding the types of traumas that our participants experienced could have also provided additional context. However, this information was not available to us.

## Conclusions

Black girls in urban environments who have experienced trauma face myriad challenges to their socioemotional and educational well-being. While some aspects of their school experiences mirror those of Black boys, Black girls also experience very nuanced differences in school. Addressing the needs of these students may require additional training for school staff. More broadly, we recommend that more intentional shifts in systemic policies and practices be made to provide more culturally appropriate and trauma-sensitive school environments that help students to succeed.

## Competing Interests

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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