

**Policy as Punishment and Distraction: The Double Helix of Racialized Sexual Harassment
of Black Girls**

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Author Note

Abstract

Black girls' experiences with sexual harassment in schools remains critically understudied. To mediate this void, this study explored the role of educators and school policy as disrupting or perpetuating racialized sexual harassment towards them. Using a Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013) framework, we argue educator response and education policy create a nexus of subjugation that makes Black girls increasingly vulnerable to experience racialized gender sexual harassment at the hands of adults and peers, while largely failing to provide protection from or recourse for such harassment.

Keywords:

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McKenzie Adams, a 4th grade Black girl, died by suicide after she endured bullying and harassment for months by a white male classmate who regularly called her racist and gendered slurs (Stanley-Becker, 2018). McKenzie’s family sued the school district arguing that they failed to enforce local, state, and federal anti-bullying statutes when educators “ignored the racial and gender specific abuse and venom to which she was subject” (*Adams v. Demopolis Schools*, p. 12). The school’s “deliberate indifference” to McKenzie’s “basic human needs” (p. 31) led to her death. The Adams’ lawsuit detailed the family’s repeated attempts to meet with school personnel across months of harassment that were consistently rejected. Even after the family and McKenzie brought the bullying to the attention of her classroom teacher and Assistant Principal, school personnel failed to protect her from the classmate’s racist and sexist assaults. In one instance, McKenzie’s teacher even responded “tell it to the wall because I do not want to hear it” (p. 15) and threatened to discipline her for responding to the harassment.

Investigations by the school district and police in the wake of McKenzie’s death found no evidence of bullying and harassment (Taylor, 2018). The police chief remarked, “I’m not saying they’re making false allegations...They may have made reports to the school; we just don’t have anything in writing.” Law enforcement stated because educators did not write down any details regarding the bullying and harassment, there was nothing police could do. McKenzie Adams’ case represents how the role of policy matters for Black girls in schools—it distracts and punishes. In this article, we argue policy becomes punishing as it endangers Black girls, (re)producing the flow of power, prompting policy to become an obstruction to justice instead of the catalyst.

McKenzie's death serves as a somber reminder that schools actively fail Black girls in a multitude of ways. Black girls are suspended at a rate of 6 times that of white girls without exemplifying a difference in behavior (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Teachers and administrators stereotype Black girls as dangerous (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equality, 2017), perceive them to be less innocent (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017), and expect them to assimilate into hegemonic norms of white femininity (Carter-Andrews et al., 2019). This results in Black girls being placed under constant surveillance (Annamma, 2018), increasing their risk of being punished (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017), and subject to a generally hostile schooling environment (Brown, 2009). McKenzie's case exemplifies an additional way schools fail Black girls through the inability of school personnel and policy to provide protection for them from racial and sexual violence.

Racial and gendered violence in schools is important to study because, as illustrated above, Black girls' experiences are unique (Miller, 2008). Yet, Black girls' broader educational experiences (Butler, 2018), and specifically their experiences with sexual harassment, remain critically understudied. Recent scholarship has focused on Black girls' experiences with harassment by peers and the resulting discipline (Harris & Kruger, 2020). However, there is less discussion on what the combined role of teachers and policy play in perpetuating or disrupting sexual harassment in schools. Given this void, we ask:

1. What is the role of educators in the sexual harassment of Black girls?
2. How do policies constrain or afford the response to the sexual harassment of Black girls?

To answer these questions, we briefly explore the literature on the sexual harassment of Black girls. Next, we share the theoretical framing and research design of this study. Finally, we reveal

findings rooted in the experiences of Black girls to better understand the role of educators and policies in sexual harassment.

Literature Review

Sexual harassment in K-12 schools is understudied, but “nearly half (48 percent) of students experience sexual harassment at school, either in person or online, and 87 percent of those students said that the harassment had a negative effect on them” (Hill & Kearnl, 2011, p. 2).

For Black girls, sexual harassment is especially dangerous as “22 percent reported being kissed or touched without their consent” (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). Often schools do not protect Black girls from sexual harassment, instead they are stereotyped and punished for defending themselves against such harassment (Wun, 2016). Likewise, a proliferation of security mechanisms in schools like metal detectors, security personnel, and dress codes policies have become gateways that also make Black girls more susceptible to sexual harassment. Here, we explore four general themes: stereotyping, surveillance, dress code policies, and the role of educators.

Stereotypes and sexual harassment

Black girls were stereotyped by adults in schools as more sexually provocative because of their race (Epstein et al., 2017)—an assumption rooted in the belief that Black girls were more sexually active. Adults also suggested Black girls encourage sexual harassment by the way they dress or act (Rahimi & Liston, 2011). Additionally, instead of being imagined as the victim of sexual harassment, Black girls were often constructed as the aggressor and disciplined for responding to sexual harassment (Tonnesen, 2013). This is especially important because of the severity of sexual harassment Black girls reported, including “written sexual messages/graffiti, being brushed against in a sexual way, being blocked in a sexual way, and being forced to do

something sexual other than kissing” (Espelage, Hong, Rinehart & Doshi, 2016, p. 177). So, while white girls reported experiencing more indirect harassment (e.g., being subject to jokes, gestures, name calling, flashing), Black girls faced much more direct harassment and assaults in schools. Likewise, when Black girls defended themselves from such sexual harassment, they were often criminalized as a result (NWLC, 2018).

Surveillance and sexual harassment

Schools with higher Black and Brown populations tend to have metal detectors and law-enforcement officers on site (Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Morris, 2016). These security measures are designed to instill safety, but further exacerbate Black girls’ interactions with hyper-surveillance and sexual harassment. Girls reported having to strip layers of clothing off so as to not set off metal detectors, leaving them feeling exposed. As one Black girl explained, “Ok...you are very uncomfortable. You have to strip down to the T....You basically got to come to school naked” (Crenshaw et al, 2015, p. 31). Security and staff also watched closely for dress code violations, at times using unwanted and unwarranted physical touch to reprimand students. Black girls felt their bodies were under intense scrutiny from the moment they entered school (Smith-Evans, George, Graves, Kaufmann, & Frohlich, 2014). Thus, dress code policies drove surveillance, which regularly resulted in sexual harassment.

Dress codes and sexual harassment

Dress codes were used to justify sexual harassment through a focus on Black girls’ bodies as inherently deviant. Carter-Andrews et al. (2019) found “Upholding the status quo manifested as policing Black girls’ bodies through inconsistent dress code enforcement by adults” (p. 33). This inconsistent enforcement—one focused and enacted on Black girls’ bodies more often than their peers—sends messages to Black girls that they deserve to be subjected to racial and gender-

based harassment in schools (Watson, 2016). Dress codes also allow for teachers to comment on Black girls' bodies publicly, opening the door for students to comment as well,

Too many schools make clear that girls need to cover up their bodies so as not to “distract” or “tempt” boys. That enforcement sends the clear message that boys are not responsible for their bad behavior. By blaming boys' misconduct on girls' choices, schools promote an environment where sexual harassment is excused. Students may think it is appropriate to comment on girls' bodies because they see their teachers do it, too, when they enforce the dress code. (NWLC, 2018, p. 20)

Public comments by adults about Black girls' bodies and clothing make them more vulnerable to sexualizing comments and actions by peers. The reinforcement of dress code policies in such public fashion also creates hostile situations wherein Black girls end up blamed for their own harassment.

Educators and sexual harassment

Over a third of students named teachers and other school employees as the perpetrators of sexual harassment (AAUW, 2001). It is important to note that there is very little literature examining the role of educators in sexually harassing students and what little exists centers the experiences of white girls. Timmerman (2003) found “teachers are perpetrators in 27% of all incidents, and most incidents of unwanted sexual attention by teachers occur in the classroom (69%).” Given this significance of teachers sexually harassing youth in classrooms, it was important for us to consider what teachers' roles were in sexual harassment of Black girls.

Educators play a complex and multifaceted role in the sexual harassment of Black girls in schools. Several studies note teachers' complacency in Black girls being sexually harassed by their peers and their failure to provide protection (Carter-Andrews et al., 2019; Crenshaw et al.,

2015, Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). Teachers often disregarded Black girls' reports of sexualized aggressions as just teasing and not that serious (Rahimi & Liston, 2011), or encouraged Black girls to just ignore the harassment (Hill & Kearnl, 2011), ergo creating a culture where sexual harassment becomes acceptable (Harris & Kruger, 2020). Disturbingly, "often the sexual harassment of black female students is viewed as warranted or expected" (Rahimi & Liston, 2011, p. 804). Often, this led to educators disciplining Black girls for sexual harassment they experienced (Wun, 2016). Ultimately, the literature shows that sexual harassment was situated as the problem of Black girls and they were labeled, surveilled, and punished for experiencing sexual harassment. Consequently, Black girls and the ways they are especially susceptible to sexual harassment in schools are rendered invisible (Patton, Crenshaw, Haynes, & Watson, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Given the invisibility, surveillance, and punishment that Black girls face, we turned to Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013) to frame and analyze the sexual harassment of Black girls in schools. DisCrit originates from the intellectual tradition of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS). Particularly, DisCrit's epistemological lineage is built from the conceptualization of intersectionality built by Black women and feminists of color including Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Adrienne Wing, (1990), and Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1991). [Crenshaw's \(1991\) work is particularly relevant for this paper as it provided the foundation for DisCrit, recognizing how multiple subordinations limited the power of the law to specifically address Black women's experiences with sexual harassment. Reflecting on the defense of Anita Hill, Crenshaw \(1991\) noted how we needed to move beyond multiple identities](#)

or essentialism and instead “assert those crucial aspects of her location that were erased, even by even by many of her advocates—that is, to state what difference her difference made” (p. 1299).

Consequently, DisCrit exposes that the processes of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in ways that (re)produce conceptions of normal (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011; Erevelles & Minear, 2010). Ableism creates an ideal human—arguing that only normal bodies, minds, and behaviors are desirable and that all others should be remediated or segregated (Campbell Kumari, 2014). In a system of white supremacy, ableism and racism work together to situate whiteness as normal, and Black people as abnormal. In schools, this means that beliefs about race influence how a student is positioned and (not) supported in learning and behavior.

Next, DisCrit recognizes how once norms are created through racism and ableism, those boundaries position people outside of the norm as problematic (Artiles, 1998). Hence, Black girls, who are already imagined as less intelligent and capable, are situated as deficient through educator discourse and practices (Nanda, 2011; Morris, 2016). DisCrit also uncovers how other oppressions intersect with racism and ableism. Black girls are constructed as deviant in different ways than Black boys. Educators’ “assumptions about Black girls are deeply grounded in historical stereotypes about Black women” (Annamma et al., 2016). In other words, white feminism, anti-Blackness, misogynoir, and cis-heteropatriarchy uniquely shape Black girls’ experience schools.

The property rights of both whiteness and ability provide benefits like being considered smart, regardless of performance (Harris, 1993; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). For Black girls, they are consistently subjected to adultification that positions them as are older and less innocent than their peers (Epstein et al, 2017). Moreover “Black girls were perceived to know more about

adult topics and are more knowledgeable about sex than their white peers” (ibid. p. 8). Being viewed as more knowledgeable about “negative issues” (e.g., sex, crime) is a form of ableism as Black girls are being situated as abnormal, and therefore deviant; it is another form of dehumanization (Bailey & Mobley, 2019). Consequently, this view of Black girls as more knowledgeable about sex situates them outside property rights of whiteness and denies them access to innocence.

Finally, DisCrit privileges the voices of multiply-marginalized populations (Matsuda, 1987). We juxtaposed the master-narrative that Black girls simply act out more, resulting in being overrepresented in disciplinary actions, with the counter-narratives the girls themselves provided. To do this, we positioned Black girls as experts, to generate knowledge about their own lives, disciplinary disparities, and needed changes in education.

Research Design

This research was part of a larger two-year study that explored the overrepresentation in disciplinary actions of Girls of Color. In the larger project, interviews and focus groups were conducted with 51 Girls of Color (32 interviews, 17 focus groups), nine teachers (eight interviews, three focus groups), and 11 family members of Girls of Color (10 interviews, three focus groups)¹. Other data included observations in classrooms, at school events, and district parent meetings, the analyses of 10 news articles about racial equity in the participating district, and multiple district policy documents. Both theoretically and methodologically, the project that we present here draws from existing research on Black girls and discipline disparities (Jones, 2009).

Local Context and Settings

¹ Participants were between 11 and 18 years old in grades 6-12th.

This study included three sites: two middle schools and one high school in the school district. The Midwestern school district where the study took place had evidence of Students of Color overrepresented in special education and discipline, while concomitantly underrepresented in gifted and talented². Tension in the district and community had been growing when recent events between Girls of Color and school staff ignited a firestorm that ended in a teacher resigning. Thus, our study adds to the literature on Black girls in the midwest, an important contribution given that work describing Black girls' experiences often focuses on urban schools.

Participants

Fifty-one Girls of Color participated in this study. All students were between 11 and 18 years old and in grades 6-12. In this paper, we focalize on 18 interviews and focus groups with Black girls (n=26)³, along with the analyses of three district-wide policies⁴ on anti-bullying and sexual harassment to address the ways policy landed in the girls' lives. This focus is because the voices of Black girls are rarely highlighted in sexual harassment literature and we believe they are capable of naming the inequities they face and potential solutions. Because we believe Black girls are knowledge generators, in this paper, we do not include data from other participants and instead focalize the voices, perspectives and lived experiences of Black girls.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data was collected over a period of prolonged engagement that included multiple participants engaging in a variety of methods (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Through semi-structured

² Some of the details in these sections have been obscured or left purposefully vague so as to not risk the anonymity of participants.

³ This includes participants who identified as multiracial Black. We want to both recognize the complexities of racial identification by honoring those that named themselves as multiracial and understand that the social construction of race means that many of these girls who identified as multiracial or African were often collapsed into a category of Black by school personnel and others.

⁴ School sites did not have building-level policies specific to bullying and sexual harassment; they defaulted to the policies and procedures outlined at the district level.

interviews, students traced their individual education trajectories, and their experiences with discipline. Students also examined national discipline data in focus groups as a catalyst to discuss students' perspectives of disciplinary practices.

Data analysis was ongoing and iterative consisting of multiple rounds of coding and meaning making (Bhattacharya, 2017). Data was collected, analyzed for emerging themes, and then themes and hunches were incorporated in the next round of data collection so participants could member check throughout the process (Rodwell, 1998). Our analysis consisted of three rounds of coding, including unitizing, categorizing, and defining (Rodwell, 1998; Saldaña, 2013), before we developed a code scheme applicable to the entire corpus of information (Erikson, 2004). After this initial inductive approach, we drilled down into the sexual harassment code and developed the findings below.

We undertook multiple strategies to build trustworthiness, or credibility, of findings. Particularly, member checking throughout the data collection process allowed researchers to review findings with participants, so they could confirm accuracy, clarify, and add information (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016). Researchers discussed initial findings with participants during interviews and focus groups by asking follow-up questions and using elicitation techniques.

Positionality & Ethics

As authors who identify as a Black woman, a Black-Asian woman (PI), and a white woman, we were aware of the seriousness of these findings. We want to both protect the anonymity of these Black girls and address the school district's lack of protection of them. When the research team began to notice the sexual harassment finding in initial data analysis, we immediately began asking all girls and teachers about this theme so as to understand the scope of

the issue of sexual harassment in the lives of the girls. The PI also discussed sexual harassment explicitly with the girls and asked them what they needed. The girls in the study requested that we share with them how to discuss sexual harassment with their families and school personnel, so we did that explicitly during future discussions.

When data collection was finished, we explicitly shared our findings about sexual harassment with teachers and presented our findings to the school district. The school district reported an intention of moving forward with changing policy and practices related to sexual harassment. We have not heard anything since that initial discussion, so we are sending a draft of this paper to the superintendent.

Findings

In our initial data analysis “bullying” was a dense code, indicating frequency in its relationship to disciplinary inequities for Black Girls. A deeper analysis of the code revealed what Black girls were describing was actually sexual harassment. Concurrently, we found the term sexual harassment was only explicitly used by one participant, Diana:

But a lot of people get made fun of for like not having a butt or not having boobs and stuff. And I really didn't know that it was sexual harassment until my mom told me. And yea a lot of people don't know and a lot of people don't tell.

If Diana's mother had not explained the difference between bullying and sexual harassment, Diana would not have had the language to accurately narrate her experience. For all of the reporting of bullying Black girls conveyed, not one mentioned educators clarifying the distinction between bullying and sexual harassment. This is significant because how educators respond to reporting is both influenced by the importance they assign to the matter and the policy they engage; this is discussed more below.

Given both the density of the theme and the lack of outright naming, we sought to surface sexual harassment in future data collection, which was underlying much of the theme of bullying. When Black girls named bullying as contributing to disciplinary disparities, we discussed the distinction between bullying and sexual harassment and asked them to clarify to which they were referring. We also began to present the definition of sexual harassment, inquiring about incidents of sexual harassment and their relationship to discipline explicitly.

The findings of iterative data collection and analysis were significant as Black girls reported being sexually harassed across the corpus of information. Consequently, we organized the findings as 1) Reasons for Sexual Harassment, 2) Impacts of Sexual Harassment, and 3) Teachers as Sexual Harassers. We provide the educator's role and the policy response for each to illustrate how they inform the ways Black girls experience sexual harassment.

Reasons for Sexual Harassment of Black Girls

Black girls repeatedly reported being harassed for their bodies, (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, skin tone, weight, religion, physical impairments). Comments focused on Black girls' bodies were constant and their race and gender were perceived as a lack of femininity. Tatiana described one harasser,

And it's like one person, oh, and he's a boy. He's white, and he makes fun of me for a lot of different things, like, race for example, he'll make fun of that. And they'll make fun of me, like my skin color and stuff.

Tatiana's description of being bullied for race and the hue of her skin was representative of the majority of participants. Viola recalled, "I got bullied a lot there because I was like overweight and I wasn't white, essentially, so I got bullied a lot..." Viola was targeted because of her race and weight; her body was positioned as unwanted due to its difference from white femininity.

This harassment mirrors what happens to Black women and is known as *racialized harassment* (Buchanan & West, 2010).

Though some of these comments do not appear on the surface to be sexual harassment (which typically is defined as unwanted comments and advances that are sexual in nature), we recognize them as racialized gender harassment focused on Black girls' bodies. Ohito and Nyache (2019) note that disciplining of Black girls' bodies implies that "the Black girl's body is constructed as a material point of crisis." We argue that this material crisis was sexual in nature because it focused on constructing Black girls' bodies as *less desirable*. Black girls embodied difference from the norms of both white boys and white girls, and that difference was imagined as deficit. Hence, ableism, racism, and misogynoir played a large role in sexual harassment of Black girls. These raced, gendered, and abled construction of Black girls' bodies as deviant was enforced in schools and classrooms, resulting in them being sites of "sexual/gendered politics" (Henry, 1998, p. 161).

Educator Response. Black girls continually described educators' responses to their reporting of racialized gender sexual harassment as falling short. Black girls turned to adults in a variety of roles in school—teachers, counselors, principals—as their first line of defense against sexual harassment but noted that impactful interventions were minimal. Malia noted, "I hear this a lot, the teacher will say I'll watch them, if they do it again, I'll tell them to quit." Malia's description was common in our data. Black girls would report to educators they were being harassed and educators would tell Black girls they would take care of the harassment, *if* they witnessed it happening. Yet many Black girls said educators either did not witness harassment or did not follow through. Even when schools set up formal ways to report bullying and

harassment, they did not always follow-up and investigate. Amina discussed using a formal report:

Because we have like the iPads, we can send in these reports online but, last year there was like a bully hotline and, even though they were saying that they would like always answer or they would check the messages, I left a lot of messages and I never got a response back.

Black girls, like Amina, found formal routes like the reporting form ineffective because most students had not heard of it or because of lack of an educator response. The silence resonated for Black girls while their harassment went on uninterrupted.

Black girls noted other ineffective educator responses to reporting harassment. Taraji stated, “I guess it kind of depends on the adult but...it’s like they address the problem, but it doesn’t seem like a lot is happening to fix the problem.” Taraji’s distinction between addressing and fixing the problem is an important one. Samira gave an example of representative of this type of ineffective response: “Well we told her what happened and then she talked to him and then she made him just stand and do nothing.” Responses that engender humiliation, such as when students are made to stand while the rest of the class watches, were reported as ineffective. Compounding humiliation of harassment with more humiliation hurt both the Black girl being harassed and the student who did the harassing.

Many participants were told to just ignore the harassment. Abigail stated, “Like, if somebody, like, I don’t know, like, if they were making fun of them or something and somebody went and told the teacher they’ll be like, just ignore them.” Like Abigail, the Black girls in this study repeatedly made it clear that they found advice to overlook harassment ineffective. Other

participants were told not to report their harassment much like McKenzie Adams was also told. Veronica recalled,

It was like the very beginning of the year and during while I kept telling on (white girl peer), cuz she kept bothering me. Ms. Erikson was like ‘you know what, just stop tattle telling’ and I was like, ‘What?!’

What does it mean when we tell Black girls to accept racialized gender sexual harassment? As Taraji noted earlier, educator responses sometimes addressed, but rarely fixed the problem.

The educator responses continually described were ineffective at stopping harassment. Moreover, educator responses to harassment often required that Black girls assume a position of docility—walking away, telling them to quit, ignoring them—while their harassers’ behavior went unchecked. Additionally, the onus was placed on Black girls to save themselves from their bullies. Given that much of this “bullying” was really racialized gender sexual harassment focusing on Black girls’ bodies, they were being instructed to ignore racist and sexist sexual harassment; this is its own form of punishment.

Policy Response. When Black girls reported bullying, it may not have been correctly identified as sexual harassment by adults. In return, educators may have been turning to the bullying policy to dictate their (lack of) responses. The district policy defined bullying as behavior:

[That] recklessly or intentionally endangers the mental health, physical health or safety of a student...that substantially interferes with a student’s educational benefits [or] opportunities or performance... that has the effect of: physically harming a student or damaging a student’s property; threatening or knowingly placing a student in reasonable fear of physical harm...or damage to the student’s property or causing substantial

inconvenience; taunting, teasing or intimidation that is so severe, persistent or pervasive that it creates an intimidating or threatening educational environment or it substantially disrupts the orderly operations of the district.

With policy laced with phrases like “substantially interferes with a student’s educational benefits,” “reasonable fear of physical harm,” and “so severe, persistent or pervasive,” instances of bullying require *substantial* severity to qualify as a violation. The experiences Black girls described were so routine in the everyday schooling environment, educators did not identify them as policy violations. The lack of clarity around the distinction between bullying and sexual harassment made it all the more difficult for Black girls to get racialized gender sexual harassment addressed. Leaving Black girls to deal with racialized gender sexual harassment on their own was indeed a form of punishment.

The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Black Girls

Because Black girls are imagined as more sexual and more adult like (Epstein et al, 2017), they are often left to fend for themselves in the face of sexual harassment (Rahimi & Liston, 2011). Yet, sexual harassment in school has real consequences for them as Eva recognized, “Because (sexual harassment is) a very dense issue. Because it’s not even (just) relating to your mental health, it’s also with your physical health.” Black girls continuously turned inward to cope with sexual harassment. In one focus group, participants shared their lived experiences:

Sophia: Um, people like call me names and stuff and say oh she’s ugly and stuff. I say I don’t care, but I still feel hurt inside...I just say I don’t really care.

Lily: It’s kind of like when you hear someone talking about you, but you’re trying to ignore it and pretend like you didn’t hear it, like for the rest of the day you just feel kind

of like, hearing it inside your head, but you're just trying to ignore it, and when you see that person you just act like normal.

Sabrina: I've been bullied in the past. You know, you are you; you can't change that, and you can't let other people change that either because I've had family that have committed suicide because of bullying, I've had friends, and I myself have gone through suicidal thoughts and self-harm, and I was put in a mental hospital twice because of bullying and other people.

These Black girls clearly felt deep impacts of sexual harassment. Diana shared,

Diana: I got bullied a lot for how I look and stuff. And you know we would always tell the counselors and something and the principal and... to try to make it stop but it wouldn't ever stop.

Interviewer: Yea. How did that make you feel about school?

Diana: I didn't want to go for a very long time.

The accumulation of this plus the targeting their bodies, resulted in Black girls being deeply hurt and exhausted by racialized gender sexual harassment in schools.

Educator Response. No Black girl indicated their harassment ended because of the individual or collective efforts of their teachers and school—i.e. anti-bullying policies, campaigns, curriculum, programming, behavioral interventions. Educator inaction remained the most common response to Black girls' reports of sexual harassment. Denisia stated, "There's a lot of sexual harassment at this school. A lot, and like...I've reported it to the principal like five different times this year and nothing has happened or changed." Like bullying, ineffective educator response to the sexual harassment discouraged Black girls from further reporting. Myosha stated,

(B)ut a lot of times when there are like sexual taunts or harassments or they get like obscene remarks, like a lot of students don't like tell their teachers or it's said like really quietly. So yes a lot of people are afraid to tell their teachers or if they were harassed or if someone made an obscene remark to me cause a lot of teachers would say okay I'll talk about it but like, it doesn't happen or not, like it's kind of a problem.

From cumulative experiences of educators not addressing the sexual harassment adequately, most Black girls gave up on reporting.

This lack of effective action also left many Black girls feeling isolated and eroded levels of trust with educators and school. Diana described,

But, they really don't tell us how we should react, we have to figure it out on our own....So, we just kind of like, drifting ourselves away from letting anybody know, because it's easier, and it'll die down. But we just have to wait...

Unfortunately, this remoteness Diana described was all too common. Tatiana also noted, "So [you] deal with it, just sort of ignoring. Talk to someone you don't even trust, cause there's not a lot of people." Alexa reiterated a similar notion, I don't think [bullying reporting app] is going to help anything. That's just the principal's way of thinking they're going to do something." Alexa, like most Black girls in the study, felt that educators repeatedly illustrated racialized gendered sexual harassment was not an issue worthy of their attention. Ultimately, Black girls realized how dangerous both the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and the isolating lack of response to it was. Essentially, they recognized they were unsafe and unguarded by adults, and could not count on schools to protect them. Through their silence, educators were conditioning Black girls to accept sexual harassment as an inevitable part of Black girlhood that they must endure.

Policy Response. Once the distinction between bullying and sexual harassment became clear in our interviews, it was easier for Black girls to name their experiences and the impacts. While they may have originally reported their offenses as bullying, all of what the girls described was actually sexual harassment per the district policy:

Sexual harassment may result from verbal, physical, or psychological conduct, or written material. [It] may include verbal harassment or abuse; unwelcome advances or pressure for sexual activity; the request for sexual favors; repeated remarks to a person, with sexual or demeaning implication; unwelcome touching; suggesting or demanding sexual involvement; implied or explicit threats; or other inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature.

Black girls' reports of sexual harassment should have been interpreted along these lines, but the policy still was not applied. Also, much like the bullying policy, this policy required harassment be "sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent." The focus on the severity of the abuse communicated only the most extreme forms of harassment (e.g. explicitly sexually deviant) would be responded to. Moreover, the policy may not be read to include remarks about Black girls' bodies that are dehumanizing because they are not imagined as sexual, but as we illustrated previously, they are experiencing racialized gender sexual harassment. Educators continued to deny Black girls a response to their maltreatment, and the sexual harassment policy remained non-functional as students were not given relief. Unresponsive policy to the everyday racialized gender sexual harassment that happened to Black girls in schools also left them open to punishment when they stood up for themselves.

Teachers as Sexual Harassers

Students reported that teachers directly perpetuated sexual harassment in schools in two ways. First, they critiqued Black girls through dress codes and comments about their bodies. Second, they directly sexually harassed Black girls. Majenta described one teacher as “always looking at...people when they walk and for the way they dress.” Majenta concisely describes the surveillance Black girls felt from teachers as their bodies were under constant scrutiny. Ramona noted, “[I got bullied by a teacher] for not dressing professional...Like, If I didn’t wear jeans, he basically [was] saying I looked like trash. Like, yeah, he did that a lot.” Ramona’s statement indicated how teacher surveillance of Black girl’s clothing was used as an outlet to comment on their bodies, and also their value. These instances sometimes ended with exclusionary discipline as Marisol recounted:

I got like um this one teacher that I didn’t really like, she was a substitute....And then she was like, “You look lazy. Put your legs down.” And I was like, “But our teacher always lets us do this.” And she was like, “Well I’m not your teacher so I can tell you to do this.” And like, since I was already mad, I was like, “You’re not even a real teacher though.” Then we started arguing and I got [in-school suspension] for that.

Teachers’ comments on Black girls clothing and bodies were a vehicle to comment on their worth; a consistent surveillance mechanism that found Black girls as deficient. This commenting on Black girls’ bodies was something teachers did regularly and was a form of racialized gender sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment by teachers also happened in more direct ways. Across the corpus of information, Black girls described interactions with problematic teachers they described as “weird,” “awkward,” and “very creepy” that made them “uncomfortable.” Frequently Black girls described educator conduct that was sexual in nature and targeted towards their bodies.

Lily recalled, “Like I wasn’t his student but, I would go into his classroom to get something for one of my teachers and you know he would just, you know, like look down my shirt.” Multiple students, like Lily, discussed male teachers looking at them inappropriately and the overwhelming feelings of discomfort it produced. What we found concerning was this type of harassment—looks and actions targeting Black girls sexually—was not isolated to one or two teachers; multiple teachers were named as sexual harassers across our three school sites. In other words, this kind of harassing behavior from male teachers was pervasive for Black girls.

Concurrently, multiple Black girls recalled interactions with repeat offenders—the same teachers who became known throughout the student body as harassers. These teachers consistently made girls feel uncomfortable through looks, comments, and even pedagogy focused on Black girls’ bodies. Alexa remembered “(it) felt kind of sexual, that’s how it felt with Mr. Y, because of the way he looks at you. He kind of looks you up and down.” In a different interview, Zendaya also shared her experiences with Mr. Y, “He told the girls to wear yoga pants even when they were not in yoga class!” Zendaya, like multiple Black girls in the study, suggested Mr. Y made them do physical activities, such as yoga (though his subject matter was not physical education), in order to put them in compromising positions and comment on their bodies. Other Black girls described avoiding Mr. Y’s classroom altogether to avoid being “touched weird, or something like that.”

Like Mr. Y, Mr. X was another repeat harasser that was consistently named as someone Black girls felt unsafe near. Mr. X also used his classroom as a means to touch girls’ bodies. Luna remembered,

We did, uh, (physical activity) last year... and he always picks a girl to do, like, guinea pig moves, to teach the kids how to do it and he didn’t pick a boy, like ever, I think. And

it's awkward cause we'd be put in, like, the weirdest positions on planet earth, like, he's have his hand like around our neck and then our foot would be, like, all the way up here and this is awkward. This is weird... it's just like, uh, it's awkward and it feels kind of like sexual.

Mr. X always selecting a girl to model wrestling moves on and putting them in vulnerable positions in front of classmates happened frequently. In fact, both teachers were so well-known for this type of predatory conduct a whisper network developed around them throughout the district. Ashton recounted,

Um, one of my friends, she's my neighbor...before I came to this school, she would like tell me about teachers to like watch out and she always mentioned how, um, Mr. Y was like kind of creepy in some ways.

Black girls at three different schools and in varying grades had heard of these two teachers, with the network spanning generations.

Educator Response. Black girls reported wanting teachers to stop commenting on their bodies. Kennedy stated, "Yeah. Um, ... I feel like, uh, maybe they should like, try to get the teachers to be more teacher-like and not, and not mean and kind of bully to other kids." When teachers engaged in racialized gender sexual harassment through commenting on their bodies and value, Black girls perceived them as bullies. Yet, Black girls did not report these incidents of teacher sexual harassment. Given that they were not protected when students were harassing them, Black girls assumed they would not be protected when teachers sexually harassed them.

It is not clear if other educators knew that these teachers were sexually harassing the girls. It is possible that the whisper network that developed around the two serial harassers may not have gotten back to teachers. However, it is also plausible that this was ignored. Teachers

often do not have adequate training from teacher education programs to recognize and address sexual harassment (Meyer, 2008). Moreover, many teachers feel that administration will not support them if they do report any kind of bullying or harassment (ibid). Given these realities, educator response is difficult to predict. However, what was important is that no Black girl reported these teachers sexually harassing them. Trust in educators to respond effectively to other educator's sexual harassment of Black girls was immaterial.

Policy Response. The district policy defines sexual harassment by employees against students as conduct with “the purpose or effect of interfering with an individual’s academic or job performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive academic or working environment.” This policy does not capture most of what the girls described, including that their bodies are being commented on, looked at, and even touched in ways that made them uncomfortable by teachers. Consequently, there was no recourse for Black girls who were being objectified by educators. Those educators held all the power and neither their colleagues nor policies addressed the racialized gendered sexual harassment of Black girls by educators.

Discussion

Previous literature has shown the ways Black girls are stereotyped, surveilled, discipline when they respond to sexual harassment (Epstein et al., 2017; Rahimi & Liston, 2011; Tonnesen, 2013). This literature has been so necessary to explain the discipline disparities Black girls’ experience. Wun (2016) specifically looked at how discipline policy impacted the experiences of Black girls. As Wun (2016) notes, “by which Black women and girls are not only sexually assaulted, but denied recognition of the potential to be injured, and the injury itself” (p. 188). What Wun is describing is how Black girls who have been disciplined for the violence they experience when they do not report. Our findings illustrate what happens to the

Black girls who are not disciplined but are responded to in ways that align with school district policy. The policy becomes a distraction, one wherein educators can say they have followed policy but Black girls are left without acknowledgement or any kind of justice, which is its own form of punishment.

What our data shows is that both educator response and education policy create a double helix of oppression (both interpersonal and structural) that make it incredibly difficult for Black girls to be protected from racialized gendered sexual harassment. A double-helix is made up of two strands and one bonding agent and is a blueprint to replicate itself over time (Watson & Crick, 1953⁵). Though originally a concept about DNA, Delgado & Stefancic (2008) argue scholars needed to understand the helical nature of “how racial relations replicated themselves, endlessly and ineluctably, generation after generation” (p. 476).

The policy and educator response to the racialized gendered sexual harassment of Black girls creates a double helix of oppression; two strands that reinforce each other. The helical nature of these strands both inadequately define and address sexual harassment, making it nearly impossible for Black girls to get harassment addressed in schools. Moreover, this double helix replicates itself over time, perpetuating the pushout of Black girls over generations (Morris, 2016). The bonding agent that links the two strands of the double helix of Black girls’ oppression is their *outsider-within* positionality. Conceptualized by Patricia Hill Collins (1986; 1999), Black women occupy an outsider-within status where they are constantly in “social locations or border spaces [of] unequal power” (1999, p. 85) with “situational identities that are attached to specific

⁵ It is not lost on us that Watson & Crick made use of Rosalind Franklin's work without her knowledge or permission. Though beyond the scope of this paper, we want to acknowledge the way patriarchy constructs these men as the discoverers of world changing knowledge, but that could not have been achieved without stealing this woman's ideas. Particularly because Watson wrote of Franklin “The thought could not be avoided that the best home for a feminist was in another person's lab”, she was subjected to much gender harassment that diminished her incredible contributions to this work.

histories of social injustice” (ibid, p. 86). Black girls are members “within” a school community but remain far “outside” its protection as evidenced by the tragedy of McKenzie Adams’ death by suicide and the stories these Black girls tell.

Black girls are situated by power relations that (re)produce injustice for them as perpetuated by policy as a punishing distraction and educators as adversaries. Said differently, policy situates white students as the norm and too often translates into punishing distractions for Black girls simply seeking refuge from sexual harassment. If policies were to instead centralize Black girls, it would both reveal the limits of policy and educator response as we have done here, and also raise questions of how others at the margins are (not) supported by both (Collins, 1999). Previous literature has illustrated how bullying and other zero-tolerance are used specifically against Black girls to criminalize their interactions with peers (Annamma et al, 2016; Wun, 2016). What our data shows is that educator responses and bullying policy combined to make it incredibly difficult for Black girls to be protected from racialized gendered sexual harassment. Thus, they are simultaneously hyper-criminalized *and* endangered by educators and policies. As *outsiders-within* in schools, Black girls deserve a reimagining of educational policy that remedies and restores the humanity long denied them in schools.

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