The University of Texas at Austin
Texas Education Review
College of Education

Journal Homepage: Texas Education Review
Published online: February 2019
Submit your article to this journal

Suspendable and Expendable, Kicking Out and Throwing Away Black Girls: An Analysis of a School District's Policies and Practices

ALTHERIA CALDERA
Texas A&M University-Commerce

To cite this article: Caldera, A. (2018). Suspendable and expendable, kicking out and throwing away Black girls: An analysis of a school district's policies and practices. *Texas Education Review*, *7*(1), 30-47. http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/10

Suspendable and Expendable, Kicking Out and Throwing Away Black[1] Girls: An Analysis of a School District's Policies and Practices

ALTHERIA CALDERA
Texas A&M University-Commerce

"School discipline has been used as an instrument for spirit-murdering Black girls, and it is the intentional death of the Black spirit that can result in a lifelong imprisonment of the mind and soul even when there are no visual bars present" (Hines & Wilmot, 2018, p. 63).

In *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave,* the book's editors and contributors made a bold, clear exclamation: Black women exist, Black women matter, Black women are brave (Hull, Bell Scott, & Smith, 1982). Their anthology responded to the need to make Black women visible as a distinct group not to be subsumed within the Black race or female gender. It was a response to a challenge identified by revolutionary scholar Anna Julia Cooper (1892) almost one hundred years prior: "She [the Black woman] is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledged factor in both" (p. 134). The "woman question" and "race problem" are also reflected by Sojourner Truth in her legendary mid-19th century speech known as, "Ain't I a Woman?" as Truth challenged attendees at the Women's Rights Convention in 1848 to recognize Black womanhood as an experience unlike Black manhood and dissimilar to white womanhood (Biography, 2018). While Black men and White women were battling for the right to vote, Truth inquired about the rights of individuals who were both woman and Black. Since that time, scholars in a wide range of disciplines have found relevance in this question: *What about Black women*? I find a similar question particularly apropos to the field of education studies: *What about Black girls in schools?*

Research Purpose

In this paper, I follow in the line of Cooper's and Truth's work by insisting that educators acknowledge and address the distinct positionality of Black girls in their policies and practices. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how Black girls in Fort Worth Independent School District of Fort Worth, Texas, are impacted by the District's recently adopted *Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy* and unjustly penalized by selected behavioral expectations in the *Student Code of Conduct* and by dress codes in the *Standards of Dress*, resulting in their disproportionate suspensions. The district defines *disproportionality* as "the over- or under-representation of a given population group, often defined by racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also defined by socioeconomic status, national origin, English proficiency, gender, and sexual orientation" (Breed, 2016). Additionally, I interrogate current district practices designed to mitigate the over-suspension of Black girls. Though Fort Worth Independent School District is the focus of this paper, the criminalization of Black girls is endemic to large districts in the state of Texas (Moran Jackson, Hatcher, & Jones, 2015) and throughout the South (Smith & Harper, 2015). Consequently, findings are relevant to districts across Texas and the Southern United States. Questions that guided my inquiry include the following:

1) How does the District's *Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy* impact Black girls?
2) In what ways might the District's *Student Code of Conduct* and *Standards of Dress* lead to disciplinary actions against Black girls?

[1]Black and African American are used interchangeably to refer to individuals of African descent.

3) What District practices may be effective and/or ineffective in reducing the disproportionate suspension of African American girls?

Research Approach

To answer the first two questions, I selected several official Fort Worth ISD documents— a) *Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy*, b) *Student Code of Conduct*, and c) *Standards of Dress*—for document analysis. Document analysis can be defined as "a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents" to interpret content and make meaning (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). In document analysis, researchers draw upon multiple sources to identify convergence and corroboration in an effort to reduce potential bias (Brown, 20009). I used a line-by-line approach to find evidence of the following:

- targeted efforts to address the needs of Black girls;
- behavior expectations that may lead to biased interpretations; and
- dress codes that are subjective or culturally biased.

In answering the last question, I assessed the potential effectiveness of district practices based on whether they are derived from District suspension data and are aligned with published scholarship on best practices. A description of the theoretical framework that guided my data analysis and interpretation follows.

Theoretical Framework

Black girls' existence in a society built on patriarchy and white supremacy makes it necessary to intersect the fights for the rights of women and the rights of Black citizens. This intersection is best evidenced by the ideological underpinnings of Black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought can be defined as a sociopolitical stance and theoretical framework that insists upon addressing the needs of Black women/girls as distinct from White women/girls and from Black men/boys (Hill Collins, 2000). Absent Black feminism, the multiple oppressions faced by Black women and girls become embedded within feminism's struggle for freedom from sexist oppression and Black people's struggle for liberation from anti-Black racism. It is pertinent that Black women's and girls' challenges not be diluted by race *or* gender analysis and instead be considered holistically through race *and* gender analysis. It is further necessary to recognize that Black women's/girls' marginalization stems from a matrix of domination, a system of interlocking oppressions based on race, gender, and class (Hill Collins, 2000). Said differently, Black women's and girls' lived experiences are profoundly shaped not only by racism and sexism but also by a complex intersection of these oppressive systems that uniquely marginalizes Black women and girls. For this reason, "we cannot simply add up the types of oppression that a woman suffers one-by-one as independent factors but must look at how they are interrelated" (Bunch, 1987, p. 337). For Black women and girls, these interrelations, or intersections, result in a distinctive form of oppression, *racialized sexism*—sexism experienced because of one's race (Morris, 2016). As an example, racialized sexism leads to Black (and Latina) girls being hypersexualized and objectified due to stereotypes that depict them as promiscuous sexual objects (Morris, 2016). *Misogynoir*, a term introduced by Moya Bailey in 2010, describes a form of misogyny uniquely experienced by Black women and girls as a result of racist, sexist tropes (Bailey, 2013). In sum, Black girls do not experience *just* racism or *just* sexism; they experience misogynoir, violence that happens as a result of discrimination stemming from their intersectional identities.

Crenshaw (1991), credited for coining the term "intersectionality," explained that intersectional analysis responds to the need to focus on the intersections of race and gender to account for multiple grounds of identity. Intersectional Black feminism emphasizes the importance of centering the lives of Black women/girls for examination. This centering is evident in the online social movement #SayHerName. #SayHerName, also originated by Crenshaw, was birthed as a result of the erasure of Black women in #BlackLivesMatter (Brown, Ray, Summers & Fraistat, 2017). Movements such as #SayHerName insist upon the recognition of intersectional identities such as race *and* gender instead of monolithic identities of race *or* gender (Brown et al., 2017). #SayHerName is a reminder that Black men and boys are not solely the causalities of police brutality and is an acknowledgement of the Black women and girls, too, who have been victims of state-sanctioned violence (Troutman & Jimenez, 2016). A derivative of #SayHerName that focuses exclusively on the experiences of Black girls is #BlackGirlsMatter (Troutman & Jimenez, 2016). This hashtag encapsulates a message that school districts in pursuit of equity must realize in both policies and practices: Black girls matter. As a reminder, "individuals do not separately experience gender and race; rather, they uniquely experience the social world as gendered racialized beings" (Monnat, 2010, p. 642). For this reason, it is pertinent that institutions resist what Cooper (2018, p. 77) calls "a race-only politic" in favor of an intersectional one. Intersectional analysis of gender and race simultaneously would result in important practical changes, for instance in the way the Texas Education Agency reports statewide district suspension data on its website. Presently, suspension data is reported only by race, resulting in a lack of easily accessible data on Black girls (Texas Education Agency, 2018a).

While this paper focuses on the intersection of race and gender, intersectionality is not limited by these factors alone. Further work, for example, might examine how the intersections of race, gender, and place (i.e., the U.S. South) impact discipline policies and practices that lead to the suspension of Black girls in this region.

Literature Review: Black Girls and School Suspensions

A decade of literature on the education of Black girls reveals what Kemp-Graham calls "a national crisis" (2017, p. 11) that "should cause public alarm" (Hines & Wilmot, 2018, p. 63). In essence, these studies reveal that Black girls experience disproportionate out-of-school suspension rates of varying degrees when compared to their representation in the school population (see Arango Ricks, 2014; Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Kemp-Graham, 2017; Koonce, 2012; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017; Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Slate, Gray & Jones, 2016; Wallace, 2017; Williams, 2017). As an example, a White House report indicated a suspension rate for Black girls that is 12% higher than girls of any other race (The White House Council on Women and Girls, 2015). In their comprehensive report of suspensions of Black students in Southern states, Smith and Harper (2015) revealed that Black girls comprised 56% of suspended girls, the highest percentage of both sexes and all races and ethnicities. Similarly, in Texas public schools specifically, Slate, Gray, and Jones (2016) found higher percentages of out-of-school suspensions in all grades for Black girls than for White or Hispanic girls.

Extant scholarship suggest that school discipline policies have historically criminalized, policed, surveilled, neutralized, and held captive Black students in general and Black girls specifically (Wun, 2016a). While zero-tolerance policies—policies that demand immediate suspension for certain behaviors—were designed to curtail violence in schools, they are increasingly used to punish Black students for offenses like "talking back" and other forms of perceived disrespect (Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Wallace, 2017; Wun, 2016b). The referrals and disciplinary actions may be due in part to teachers' perceptions of Black girls. Francis (2011) found that teachers view Black girls

less favorably when it comes to disruptive behavior than girls from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Likewise, Morris found that discipline problems resulted from teachers' perceptions of Black girls as "challenging to authority, loud, and not ladylike" (Morris, 2007, p. 501). Perceptions of Black girls as adults, or the adultification of Black girls, is problematic as well. Adultification is defined as "the extent to which race and gender, taken together, influence our perception of Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers" (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017, p. 2). When Black girls are seen as Black women, they are stripped of childhood innocence and freedoms (Morris, 2017).

Life outcomes for students who are suspended are troubling. In a recent study, Wolf and Kupchik (2017) found that exclusionary discipline results in negative long-term consequences. More specifically, their findings suggest "that students who are suspended in school by the time they are in grades 7–12 are at significantly greater risk of criminal victimization, criminal activity, and incarceration years later as adults" (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017, p. 423). Balfanz, byrnz, and Fox (2014) warned that out-of-school suspensions are a primary indicator of high school drop-out, leading suspended students to be excluded from post-secondary education and from realizing career opportunities (Balfanz et al., 2014). Additional research is needed to shed light on outcomes specifically for Black girls who experience school suspensions.

Limited scholarship exists focusing specifically on the effects of school policies and practices on Black girls (Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Ispa-Landa, 2017; Kemp-Graham, 2017; Wun, 2016a; Wun, 2016b). My work broadens this literature by focusing on how Fort Worth Independent School District's educational policies and practices impact Black girls. This project is distinctive in its use of document analysis as a qualitative inquiry methodology used to analyze district policies.

Fort Worth Independent School District

With an enrollment of 87,233 students, Fort Worth Independent School District (hereafter Fort Worth ISD) is the second largest school district in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area and the sixth largest school district in Texas (Niche, 2018). It is classified by the Texas Education Agency as one of eleven "Major Urban" school districts (Texas Education Agency, 2018). A majority-minority district, almost 89% of students are students of color with Hispanics being the majority at 62.5% and Blacks representing the second highest percentage at 22.9% (Fort Worth ISD, 2018a). As is consistent with national trends, teacher demographics in Fort Worth ISD reflect quite the contrary—Black (10.2%), Hispanic (26.6%), and White (59.8%) (Fort Worth ISD, 2018a). Seventy-four percent of teachers are female and 26% are male (Fort Worth ISD, 2018a). More than three-fourths of students in Fort Worth ISD are economically disadvantaged and a third are English Language Learners (Fort Worth ISD, 2018a). The District's four-year graduation rate is 85%, but disaggregated data show a four-year graduation rate of only 84% for African Americans, compared to 89% for White students (Texas Academic Performance Report, 2018b). Data throughout this report show similar gaps in outcomes between African American and Hispanic students and their White peers (Texas Academic Performance Report, 2018b). Although data contained in this report, as in TEA discipline reports, is disaggregated by several subgroups, data is not disaggregated by gender or by gender and race. This recognition is important because the absence of disaggregated race and gender data has led to the assumption that all girls are doing well in school (Smith-Evans, George, Goss Graves, Kaufmann, & Frohlich, 2014). To fully understand the experiences and outcomes for African American girls, data must be reported by race and gender, together, instead of separately by race or by gender (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). It is only through a more nuanced analysis, an intersectional analysis, that the actual state of Black girls can be revealed.

Equity Efforts in Fort Worth ISD

Fort Worth ISD appointed a new superintendent in October, 2015. Reflecting his commitment to racial equity, within a few months of his appointment, Superintendent Kent P. Scribner created a Division of Equity and Excellence in February 2016 (Breed & Moore, 2016). At the same time, the school board approved a Racial Equity Committee comprised of board members, district employees, students, and community members (Breed & Moore, 2016). One of their first tasks was the formation of a Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy (Breed & Moore, 2016). In February, 2017, the Fort Worth ISD school board voted unanimously to accept a newly conceived, groundbreaking Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy, in addition to the District's existing nondiscrimination policy (Breed & Moore, 2016).

Although the District's focus on racial equity became more intentional in 2016 under its new leader, previous racial equity work had included the Equity for Student Success Initiative, which focused on the success of African American boys (Breed & Moore, 2016). In 2015, the board had approved the Pledge by America's Great City Schools to better serve males of color in the District. The emphasis of the District is made clear by the use of "Males of Color" in the pledge more than a dozen times. Additionally, the District hosted a *My Brother's Keeper* (*MBK*) summit and established *MBK* chapters in high schools in the District in 2015 (Breed & Moore, 2016). Introduced by President Barack Obama, *My Brother's Keeper* is a 2014 White House initiative that seeks to address the opportunity gaps faced exclusively by boys of color (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2014). As a result of the overt omission of Black girls and other girls of color in MBK, over 1,600 scholars, activists, politicians, and concerned citizens penned an open letter to President Obama indicating that they were deeply bothered by the exclusion of women and girls of color from this important initiative (African American Policy Forum, 2014). Mainly as an outcome of this letter and the #WhyWeCantWait campaign (African American Policy Forum, n.d.) petitioning for the inclusion of girls of color, the White House Council on Women and Girls launched *Achieving Equity,* an effort to ensure that federal policies and programs consider the distinct needs and wellbeing of women and girls of color (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). Yet, there is no evidence available that Fort Worth ISD took any action at this time in response to this national focus. In this case, as in others, policymakers addressed racial discrimination but prioritized only the experiences of Black boys (Williams, 2017). Racial justice initiatives that focus solely on Black boys result in Black girls' experiences being undervalued and their voices absent from efforts to find solutions (Williams, 2017). This is not to say, however, that Black boys do not deserve attention, too. Black boys are the largest subpopulation to experience exclusionary discipline. Still, the increasing suspension of Black girls warranted examination then and warrants it now (Ispa-Landa, 2017; Morris, 2012; Williams, 2017;).

At the same time that the District was exerting efforts to improve outcomes for Black boys, at least four national reports[2] shedding light on educational outcomes for Black girls had been released. Each report revealed an urgent need for strategic work, namely policy and programmatic interventions, to address the discipline disparities of Black girls. Yet, it was not until January 2018 that Fort Worth ISD revealed plans to focus on Black girls in a programmatic way (Steinert, 2018). Their new focus on Black girls may have been prompted by two *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* articles entitled "Sixty-two percent of girls suspended in FWISD are Black, here's the plan to fix that" and "Cultural stereotypes play a role in Black girls being suspended," published on December 29, 2017 and January 3, 2018, respectively. An additional story highlighting the challenges faced by the District, "In Texas, Black girls are almost seven times as like to be suspended from school as White girls," was

[2]A list of these reports is found in the Appendix.

featured on the radio program the *Texas Standard* on January 11, 2018. All three stories had a common theme: the disproportionate suspensions of African American girls in Fort Worth ISD (Brisbin, 2018; The Editorial Board, 2018; Smith, 2017). Subsequently, during the District's January 23, 2018, board meeting, Michael Steinert, Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services, led a presentation on "Student Suspensions," with a particular focus on African American girls. Mr. Steinert shared the following data from 2016-2017:

- Fort Worth ISD ranks second in the state for suspensions among other major urban districts.
- African American students comprise 55% of all suspended students although they make-up only 23% of the student population.
- African American girls comprise 62% of all female suspensions, while African American boys comprise 52% of all male suspensions (Steinert, 2018).

Data absent from the presentation but obtained through a data request submitted to the District sheds more light on this topic. During 2017-2018,

- African American girls comprised approximately 12% of the student enrollment.
- African American girls consisted of 24% of the female enrollment.
- African American girls made up 18% of out-of-school suspensions in 2017-2018. (FWISD Support, personal communication, July 11, 2018)

These data revealed the severity of the disproportionality of suspensions of African American girls in Fort Worth ISD. Perhaps most alarming is that African American girls comprised 62% of female suspensions though they accounted for only 12% of the female student population. Fort Worth ISD's suspension rates for Black girls are consistent with state and national data (Arango Ricks, 2014; Hines & Wilmot, 2018; Kemp-Graham, 2017; Koonce, 2012; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017; Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Slate, Gray & Jones, 2016; Wallace, 2017; Williams, 2017).

Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy: An Incomplete Imperative

As is reflected in its title, the *Racial and Ethnic Equity Policy*, adopted in February 2017, focuses exclusively on the District's commitment to racial and ethnic equity. The superintendent's decision to make racial equity a priority in a district plagued by racial inequity since its inception (see Cannon, 2009) is bold and forward-thinking. The work of the Racial Equity Committee and the Division of Equity and Excellence is aimed at one goal—eliminating the achievement gaps that occur as a result of opportunity gaps between students of color and White students (Breed & Moore, 2016). While Black girls are included in "students of color," the racial and ethnic equity policy has a clear and explicit focus on race, not gender, and certainly not gender and race, as evidenced by the following focus statement:

> The District shall focus on improving its practices in order to ensure equity in education. Any achievement gap between white students and students of color (historically defined as black or African Americans, Africans, American Indians or Alaska natives, Asians, Latinos, native Hawaiian, or Pacific islanders) is unacceptable. (Fort Worth ISD, 2018b, p. 1)

Reflecting this focus, the District's mission statement changed from "Preparing students for success in college, career, and community leadership" to "Preparing *all* students for success in college, ca-

reer, and community leadership" (Breed & Moore, 2016). It is significant to note that the District does not have a policy on gender equity though gender is listed as a protected class in its non-discrimination policy.[3] More importantly, there is no policy in place that protects students who sit at the intersection of race and gender, namely Black girls and other girls of color. By focusing solely on race (or solely on gender), educational policies ignore Black girls' unique positionality (Arango-Ricks, 2014). As a result, Black girls fall through the cracks theoretically and pragmatically (Arango-Ricks, 2014). Fort Worth ISD and other Texas districts who prioritize equity and justice for all students must address the complex intersections of race and gender oppression in their policies. Otherwise, Black girls are rendered invisible.

Fort Worth ISD Policies

In this section, I examine how rules related to students "talking back" and being disrespectful lead to discipline bias. According to the *Fort Worth ISD Student Code of Conduct*, students are expected to "show respect for others and their property" and to "express opinions and ideas in a respectful and courteous manner," among other things (Fort Worth ISD, 2018c, p. 9). They are prohibited from "being disrespectful to adults and/or other students" (Fort Worth ISD, 2018c, p. 12). An "unprovoked display of disrespect toward school personnel" can be considered insubordination (Fort Worth ISD, 2018c, p. 41). Both disrespect and insubordination can lead to harsh punishments, like suspension (Fort Worth ISD, 2018c).

Black girls are often perceived by teachers as being loud and attitudinal, making them prone to disciplinary actions (Morris, 2007; Morris, 2016; Wun, 2016b) and to less attention and respect from teachers (Hines & Wilmot, 2018). In some cases, being loud is a way that Black girls make sure that they are visible (Arango-Ricks, 2014), while other Black girls see being heard as vulnerability to discrimination (Ayres & Leaper, 2012). In her research with African American girls, Koonce (2012) found that loudness is equated with being attitudinal, or "Talking With an Attitude" (TWA). However, actions interpreted as disrespect may simply be pushing back or questioning (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). This pushing back was described by a teacher, a study participant, who recognized that Black girls are "more likely to get a little in your face than a girl who's white might" (Lei, 2003, p. 165). Teachers, particularly authoritative ones, interpret "active resistance" as disrespect, and Black girls' leadership traits are instead labeled as questioning authority, or in disciplinary terms, defiance (Lei, 2003). As is the case with Fort Worth ISD disciplinary policies, making "smart comments" is viewed as a disciplinary problem that warrants suspension (Wun, 2016b).

There are several problems with having "respect" as an expectation. First, respect is a gendered value that is directly linked to notions of femininity (Slate, Gray & Jones, 2016). Slate, Gray, and Jones (2017) summarized the gendered racism that many Black girls face: "School discipline practices and policies can work aggressively against the efforts of many Black girls who try to reconcile the complexities of being Black and female while navigating a school system in Texas that promotes Westernized standards of femininity" (p. 257). Implicitly, African American girls are encouraged to adopt what Williams (2017, p. 78) called "traditional femininity," suggesting to them that they need to "recede into the background." "Ladylike" girls are supposed to show respect by being seen not heard and obedient, not recalcitrant. These socially constructed values are rooted in patriar-

[3]The Fort Worth Independent School District does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, age, gender identity and expression, military/veteran status, in its programs and activities (Fort Worth ISD, 2018a).

chal notions of womanhood that are designed to control women's and girls' actions and to convey where their social "place" is. This is particularly true for Black women who have been historically silenced and forced into obedience. In challenging gender norms, a Black girl who was accused of being "loud and unladylike" expressed confusion about her behavior: "So I don't know how they want me to act . . . I don't understand" (Murphy, Acosta & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013, p. 601). This student's words show her confusion and frustration with behaviors that educators consider to be appropriate for girls.

Second, having "respect" as an expectation penalizes African American girls whose home culture, including communication codes, often conflict with school culture and communication codes. For example, speaking at voice levels and in manners that are the norm at home may not be acceptable in academic settings. In order to conform to school expectations, Black girls are forced to code switch (Lei, 2003) or create "a new self" (Williams, 2017, p. 78). Possessing the ability to be bicultural leads to academic excellence (Evans-Winters, 2014) while Black girls who fully embrace their home culture at school, whether out of an inability or refusal to code switch, are penalized.

Third, respect as a behavioral expectation is highly subjective. School districts need to articulate clear and concrete actions that constitute unacceptable behavior. Clough (2015) found that students are willing to follow rules if they are consistent and not open to interpretation. Last, simply forcing students out of school with suspensions for being disrespectful allows educators to disregard the reasons behind the disrespect. Cooper contended that "sometimes Americans don't recognize that sass is simply a more palatable form of rage" (2018, p. 1). Instead of suspending Black girls for expressing their rage, educators should try to help rage-filled girls resolve the issues behind their anger. This examination of the *Student Code of Conduct* pinpoints a specific area that has proven to be problematic for African American girls and indicates where critical interrogation is needed in order to identify and eliminate biased policies.

Next, Black girls are cited more frequently than their peers for dress code violations, which results in more disciplinary referrals (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012). The Fort Worth ISD *Standards of Dress* prohibits students from wearing clothing that is "too revealing" and from wearing "head gear such as hats, scarves, bandanas, do-rags, and shower caps" (Fort Worth ISD, 2018d, para 4). As with rules regarding respect, describing clothing as "too revealing" is highly subjective, and prohibiting scarves infringes on the cultural expressions of African American girls. In Kemp-Graham's (2017) case study, Black girls were penalized for wearing tight pants and wearing cultural attire (a gele) and hairstyles (dreadlocks). These dress code violations can lead to Black girls becoming insubordinate and defiant, exacerbating their infractions (Kemp-Graham, 2017). Although the District's dress code is specific in its description of shorts, skorts, and skirts (must be no shorter than three inches above the knee), African American girls believe that they are frequently penalized for wearing clothes that are too short because of their body types (National Women's Law Center, 2018). The way these students dress "is not inherently bad or criminal but is rendered such by these rules" (Wun, 2016a, p. 182). Evidence of the racialized and gendered aspect of dress is found in an educator's description of a Black girl's clothes as a "hoochie mama skirt" (Morris, 2007, p. 507). This comment reflects the way Black girls are hypersexualized and the way their bodies are scrutinized by adults.

Morris (2007) found that Black girls disagreed with or simply ignored the dress code and stated that having to wear a uniform is like being in prison. In this way, Black girls who refused to adhere to dress codes may be simply trying to feel less institutionalized and controlled and should be offered flexibility in dress. In *Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools,* findings upheld that Black girls are penalized by racially and sexually discriminatory dress codes (National Women's Law Center, 2018). The authors of this report recommend that to avoid unjustly punishing Black

girls, districts that decide to enforce a dress code should begin their dress code with an equity statement, such as the one quoted here:

> Evanston Township High School's student dress code supports equitable educational access and is written in a manner that does not reinforce stereotypes and that does not increase marginalization or oppression of any group based on race, sex, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, cultural observance, house income or body type/size. (National Women's Law Center, 2018, p. 31)

Both of these subjective criminalized behaviors—being sassy, outspoken, and loud and dressing provocatively—are rooted in longstanding stereotypes of Black women that are also imposed upon Black girls. Stereotypes about women are mediated by race and class, as seen in stereotypes about Black women and girls. Black women and girls are judged according to the "angry Black woman" and hypersexual "Jezebel" stereotypes (Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill Collins, 2000). Undoubtedly, these stereotypes influence how educators interpret the actions of Black girls, leading to discipline referrals for violating unjust discipline policies and dress codes.

Practices Designed to Reduce Suspensions of Black Girls

In a January 23, 2018, board meeting, Fort Worth ISD district officials mentioned a need to implement "specific additional supports" for African American girls (Steinert, 2018) and listed strategies that the District intended to use or were currently using to address the disproportionate suspension of Black girls. Interestingly, though, these supports appear to have been determined without data regarding the nature of the infractions. Because infraction data was not included in the presentation to the board of trustees and have not been shared publicly by other means, I made an open records request for the following data:

> 1) What infractions led to student suspensions for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 for all suspended students?
>
> 2) What infractions led to student suspensions for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 for suspended African American girls?

This data request led to a critical discovery. The vast majority of infractions for the general student population (95%) and for African American girls (93%) that led to suspensions are designated as "Code 21 Student Code of Conduct" (FWISD Support, personal communication, July, 11, 2018). After several requests for clarification about this code, I was eventually told by Mr. Steinert that "Code 21 Student Code of Student" is a broad category of infractions and there are not specific PEIMS (Public Education Information Management System) codes that break down the detail of each infraction (Steinert, personal communication, July 16, 2018). Consequently, it is impossible to pinpoint the infractions that lead to suspension (Steinert, personal communication, July 16, 2018). Without this crucial data, any efforts to address the disproportionate suspension of African American girls is insufficient and unfocused. To the contrary, knowing why African American female students are suspended would allow for targeted, culturally sensitive interventions and equitable solutions. It is imperative that Fort Worth ISD and other Texas districts create and implement systems that make it easier to identify the nature of suspendable offenses. Even without this important data, however, several of the District's strategies are commendable and research-based:

- The Division of Equity and Excellence held and plans to continue to hold focus groups with Black girls to gather data about their educational experiences. This practice makes space for the voices of African American girls and makes them active contributors in solution-finding. Centering marginalized voices is a signature principle of Black feminist thought (Hill Collins,

2000). I recommend that researchers situate data collected from Black girls within a historical context to reveal longstanding oppression of Black women and girls (Lindsay-Dennis, 2015).

- The District plans to expand its use of restorative justice (also known as restorative discipline) practices. Restorative justice, an approach to discipline that focuses on repairing harm, building relationships, and encouraging accountability, has been shown to decrease disciplinary referrals and suspensions of students of color (Ispa-Landa, 2017).
- Providing training in culturally relevant instruction is also a district priority. Culturally relevant (or culturally responsive) teaching is teaching that draws on students' cultural backgrounds and knowledge as assets in learning (Gay, 2002). Culturally relevant teachers build on the knowledge and experiences students bring to the classroom. To be culturally relevant, "teachers first must develop their own cultural competence by understanding their students' communities and home lives" (Byrd, 2016, p. 1). A form of culturally relevant pedagogy designed specifically with African American girls in mind is Hip-hop feminist pedagogy (Brown, 2009). Hip-Hop feminist pedagogy centers the experiences of Black girls, focuses on establishing relationships with Black girls, and respects the contexts and communities of Black girls (Brown, 2009).
- Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) is an alternative to punitive discipline that focuses on teaching students appropriate behavior, rewarding positive behavior, and providing the support that students need to behave properly (Flannery, Fenning, Kato & McIntosh, 2014).
- The First Five strategy, included in the District plan, emphasizes connection before instruction. Teachers spend the first 5 minutes of each class building relationships with students. Relationship-building is central to restorative discipline practices.

These practices are important in addressing the disproportionate suspension of Black girls and should be implemented with Black girls at the forefront of planning. For these practices to be effective, educators must focus specifically on building relationships with Black girls, centering the experiences of Black girls, building on the cultural background of Black girls, and supporting Black girls in their efforts to meet District expectations.

Two practices, however, cause concern. First, the District proposed the formation of S.O.A.R. (Students Organized Against Racism) groups on campus as a remedy to the problem of over-suspensions of Black girls. Based on research and best practices in the field, singular attempts to address the needs of Black girls are ineffective. Because Black girls experience racism in ways that are different from racism experienced by Black boys, I propose a group designed to counter the gendered racism experienced by Black girls.

Next, the District highlighted the work of a high school club for African American girls, Sophisticated Ladies, as an exemplar in reducing the disciplinary referrals of African American girls. While it is prudent to address the behavior of African American girls, one must use caution in doing so. A tagline of the club is "Keeping it cute and classy." Organizations such as Sophisticated Ladies that set behavior and dress standards for Black girlhood run the risk of enforcing respectability politics. Respectability politics is defined by Cooper (2018) as "the belief that Black people can overcome many of the everyday, acute impacts of racism by dressing properly and having education and social comportment" (p. 173). Said differently, it is the belief that individuals who are members of marginalized groups should behave, speak, and/or dress in ways that meet societal expectations in order to be successful. Nyachae (2016, p. 798) found notions of respectability in her analysis of the *Sisters of Promise* (SOP), a program she and colleagues developed for marginalized Black girls in

grades 5-8. She concluded that having "womanly character" as a value forced girls to conform to perceptions of virtuousness and moral correctness and thereby contradicted Black feminist pedagogy's value for freedom of expression. While learning proper decorum is a necessary reality for Black girls, it is erroneous to believe that learning to be more "ladylike" will resolve the District's issues surrounding discipline. Morris (2016) shed light on this subject:

> Our work on behalf of Black girls cannot be about respectability politics. Etiquette lessons can be a part of social practices and agendas, but if our anti-criminalization efforts are to have teeth, schools must look far beyond whether our girls are wearing tight pants, crop tops, or pink extensions in their braids. The crisis of criminalization in schools is an opportunity to focus on the policies, systems, and institutions—in other words, the structures—that place women and girls at risk of exploitation in private and public spheres. (p. 181)

Supporting African American girls in meeting unbiased behavior expectations is certainly important but does not address the longstanding systemic issues that criminalize Black girls.

Recommendations

Based on this examination, I offer seven recommendations to school districts:

1) Districts should strive to eliminate the unique form of racism—gendered racism—experienced by Black girls.
2) Because rules about respect and dress are often discretionary and enforced based on educator bias, districts should revise their code of conduct and dress codes to make expectations clear, specific, and bias-free.
3) District and state policies and practices that render disrespect and dress code violations worthy of exclusionary discipline practices should be removed.
4) Programmatic support for Black girls should not be steeped in respectability politics, as these supports do not eliminate the institutional barriers Black girls face.
5) Districts need data-collection systems that allow them to identify the infractions that lead to suspensions.
6) Black girls need in-school support to address their psychological and emotional needs that are often a result of "unresolved trauma" (Kemp-Graham, 2017; Williams, 2017, p. 79).
7) Districts should draw upon published reports from scholars whose work centers Black girls to drive their policies and practices.[4]

Conclusion

Data regarding life outcomes for students who are suspended should be alarming to Fort Worth ISD (see Balfanz, byrnz, & Fox, 2014; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). When Black girls are suspended, districts are excluding them from opportunities for academic and career success. Although the District is now making strides to address the over-suspension of African American girls, their apparent silence for several crucial years is inexcusable. In order to redress the injustices faced by African American girls, Fort Worth ISD and other Texas school districts must eliminate "spirit-murdering" policies (Hines & Wilmot, 2018) in favor of discipline policies and practices that nurture the bodies, minds, and spirits of African American girls. Texas educators who espouse equity as a

[4]A list of relevant reports is found in the Appendix.

value must demonstrate a commitment to end the gendered racism in discipline policies and practices that result in Black girls being suspended disproportionately.

Altheria Caldera, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University-Commerce who specializes in critical multicultural education, urban teacher education, and critical qualitative inquiry. Her research and scholarship examine how race, class, gender, and the intersections among them impact educational opportunities and outcomes for minoritized students. As a teacher educator, she works to prepare aspiring teachers to provide culturally relevant education for students of color. She can be found on Twitter at @altheriacaldera.

References

African American Policy Forum. (2014). *Why we can't wait: Women of color urge inclusion in "My Brother's Keeper."* Retrieved from http://www.aapf.org/2014/06/woc-letter-mbk/

African American Policy Forum. (n.d.) *Why we can't wait: An overview of our work surrounding My Brother's Keeper Initiative*. Retrieved from http://www.aapf.org/mybrotherskeeper/

Archer-Banks, D. A. M., & Behar-Horenstein, L. S. (2012). Ogbu revisited: Unpacking high-achieving African American girls' high school experiences. *Urban Education, 47*(1), 198-223.

Arango Ricks, S. (2014). Falling through the cracks: Black girls and education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning, 4*(1), 10-21.

Ayres, M. M. & Leaper, C. (2012). Adolescent girls' experiences of discrimination: An examination of coping strategies, social support, and self-esteem. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 28*(4), 479-508.

Bailey, M. (2013). New terms of resistance: A Response to Zenzele Isoke. *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society, 15*(4), 341-343.

Balfanz, R., byrnes, v., & Fox, J. (2014). Sent home and put off-track: The antecedents, disproportionalities, and consequences of being suspended in the ninth grade. *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children At-Risk, 5*(2), 1-21.

Biography. (2018). *Sojourner Truth biography*. Retrieved from https://www.biography.com/people/sojourner-truth-9511284

Breed, S. & Moore, J. (2016). *An update on equity and excellence.* Presentation. Fort Worth Independent School District.

Brisbin, S. (2018, January 11). In Texas, Black girls are almost seven times as like to be suspended from school as White girls. *Texas Standard*. Retrieved from http://www.texasstandard.org/stories/in-texas-black-girls-are-almost-seven-times-as-likely-to-be-suspended-from-school-as-white-girls/

Brown, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal, 9*(2), 27-40.

Brown, R. N. (2009). *Black girl celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop feminist pedagogy*. New York, NY: Lang Publishing, Inc.

Brown, M., Ray, R. Summers, E., & Fraistat, N. (2017). #SayHerName: A case study of intersectional social media activism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 40*(11), 1831-1846.

Bunch, C. (1987). *Passionate politics: Feminist theory in action*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Byrd, C. M. (2016). Does culturally relevant teaching work?: An examination from student perspectives. *Student Diversity, 6*(3), 1-10.

Cannon, T. N. (2009). *Cowtown and the color line: Desegregating Fort Worth's public schools.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation.) Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas.

Cooper, A. J. (1892). *A voice from the south.* The Aldine Printing House.

Cooper, B. (2018). *Eloquent rage: A Black feminist discovers her superpower*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241-1299.

Crenshaw, K. W., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). *Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected.* New York, NY: African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies.

Epstein, R., Blake, J. J., & Gonzalez, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood.* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality.

Evans-Winters, V. E. (2014). Are Black girls not gifted? Race, gender, and resilience. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning, 4*(1), 22-30.

Flannery, K. B., Fenning, P., Kato, M. M., McIntosh, K. (2014). Effects of school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports and fidelity of implementation on problem behavior in schools. *School Psychology, 29*(2), 111-124.

Fort Worth ISD. (2018a). *Annual report*. Retrieved from https://www.fwisd.org/Page/361.

Fort Worth ISD. (2018b). *FWISD racial and ethnic equity policy*. Retrieved from https://pol.tasb.org/Policy/Download/1101?filename=AE(LOCAL).pdf

Fort Worth ISD. (2018c). *Student code of conduct*. Retrieved from https://www.fwisd.org/SCOC

Fort Worth ISD. (2018d). *Standards of dress*. Retrieved from https://www.fwisd.org/Page/5532

Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education, 53*(2), 106-116.

Harris-Perry, M. V. (2011*). Sister citizen: Shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hill Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment, 2nd edition*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hines, D. E. & Wilmot, J. M. (2018). From spirit-murdering to spirit-healing: Addressing anti-Black aggressions and the inhumane discipline of Black children. *Multicultural Perspectives, 20*(2), 62-69.

Hsieh, H. & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277–1288.

Hull, G. T., Bell Scott, P., & Smith B. (1982). *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: A history of Black feminism in the United States*. New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

Kemp-Graham, K.Y. (2017). #BlackGirlsMatter: A case study examining the intersectionality of race, gender, and school discipline. *Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership, 21*(3), 1-15.

Ispa-Landa, S. (2017). Racial and gender inequality and school discipline: Toward a more comprehensive view of school policy. *School Currents, 00*(0), 1-7.

Koonce, J. B. (2012). "Oh, Those Loud Black Girls!": A phenomenological study of Black girls talking with an attitude. *Journal of Language & Literacy Education, 8*(2), 26-46.

Lei, J. L. (2003). (Un)Necessary toughness?: Those "Loud Black Girls" and those "Quiet Asian Boys." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 34*(2), 158-181.

Lindsay-Dennis, L. (2015). Black feminist-womanist research paradigm: Toward a culturally relevant research model focused on African American girls. *Journal of Black Studies, 46*(5), 506-520.

Monnat, S. M. (2010). Toward a critical understanding of gendered color-blind racism within the U.S. welfare institution. *Journal of Black Studies, 40*(4), 637-652.

Moran Jackson, K., Hatcher, R. & Jones, L. (2015, March). *Black girls face disproportionate discipline in Texas schools* (Numbers Brief No.1). Retrieved from https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/iupra/_files/pdf/NumberBrief_1_Apr2015_Final.pdf

Morris, E. W. (2007). "Ladies" or "Loudies"?: Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms. *Youth Society, 38,* 490-515.

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, M. W. (2012). *Race, gender and the school-to-prison pipeline: Expanding our discussion to include Black girls*. New York, NY: African American Policy Forum.

Morris, M. W. (2016). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Murphy, A. S., Acosta, M. A., Kennedy-Lewis, B. L. (2013). "I'm not running around with my pants sagging, so how am I not acting like a lady?": Intersections of race and gender in the experiences of female middle school troublemakers. *Urban Review, 45*, 586-610.

National Women's Law Center. (2018). *Dress coded: Black girls, bodies, and bias in D.C. schools.* Washington, D.C.

Niche. (2018). Largest school districts in Texas. Retrieved from https://www.niche.com/k12/search/largest-school-districts/s/texas/.

Nyachae, T. M.(2016). Complicated contradictions amid Black feminism and millennial Black women teachers creating curriculum for Black girls. *Gender and Education, 28*(6), 786-806.

Oneyka-Crawford, A., Patrick, K., Chaudhry, N. (2017). *Let her learn: Stopping school pushout for girls of color.* Washington, D.C.: National Women's Law Center.

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.

Smith, E. J., & Harper, S. R. (2015). *Disproportionate impact on school suspension and expulsion on Black students in Southern states.* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education.

Smith, D. (2017, December 29). Sixty-two percent of girls suspended in FWISD are Black, here's the plan to fix that. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram.* Retrieved from https://www.star-telegram.com/news/local/community/fort-worth/article192131979.html.

Smith-Evans, L., George, J., Goss Graves, F., Kaufmann, L.S., & Frohlich, L. (2014). *Unlocking opportunities for African American girls.* New York, NY: The NAACP Legal Defense Fund and National Women's Law Center.

Steinert, M. (2018, January). *Equitable solutions for addressing disparities.* Presented at Fort Worth ISD Board Meeting. Fort Worth, Texas.

Texas Education Agency. (2018a). Discipline reports. Retrieved from https://tea.texas.gov/Reports_and_Data/Student_Data/Discipline_Data_Products/Discipline_Reports/

Texas Education Agency. (2018b). Texas public school districts categorized by type, 2015-2016. Retrieved from https://tea.texas.gov/acctres/analyze/1516/district1516.html

The Editorial Board. (2018). Cultural stereotypes play a role in Black girls being suspended. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram.* Retrieved from https://www.star-telegram.com/opinion/editorials/article192857484.html

The White House Council on Women and Girls. (2014). *Women and girls of color: Addressing challenges and expanding opportunity.* Washington, D.C.

The White House Council on Women and Girls. (2015). *Advancing equity for women and girls of color.* Washington, D.C.

The White House Office of the Press Secretary. (2014). Remarks by the President on "My Brother's Keeper" initiative. Retrieved from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/27/remarks-president-my-brothers-keeper-initiative

The White House Press Secretary. (2016). Report: Advancing equity for women and girls of color. Retrieved from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/16/report-advancing-equity-women-and-girls-color

Thomas, V. G., & Jackson, J. A. (2007). The education of African American girls and women: Past to present. *The Journal of Negro Education, 76*(3), 357-372.

Troutman, S. & Jimenez, I. (2016). Lessons in transgression: #BlackGirlsMatter and the feminist classroom. *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism, 15*(1), 7-39.

Williams, V. (2017). Making gender visible: Title IX and discriminatory school discipline. *Tennessee Journal of Race, Gender, & Social Justice*, *6*(1), 67-82.

Wolf, K. C., & Kupchik, A. (2017). School suspensions and adverse experiences in adulthood. *Justice Quarterly, 34*(3), 407-430.

Wun, C. (2016a). Against captivity: Black girls and school discipline policies in the aftermath of slavery. *Educational Policy, 30*(1), 171-196.

Wun, C. (2016b). Unaccounted foundations: Black girls, anti-Black, racism, and punishment in schools. *Critical Sociology, 45*(4-5), 737-750.

Appendix

Reports on the Over-Suspension of Black Girls in the United States

- 2012-*Race, Gender, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Expanding Our Discussion to Include Black Girls* by Morris
- 2014-*Unlocking Opportunities for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity* by Smith-Evans, George, Goss Graves, Kaufmann, and Frohlich
- 2014-*Women and Girls of Color: Addressing Challenges and Expanding Opportunities-November* by The White House Council on Girls and Women
- 2015-*Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected* by Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda
- 2015-*Disproportionate Impact of School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States* by Smith and Harper
- 2017-*Let Her Learn: Stopping School Pushout for Girls of Color* by Onyeka-Crawford, Patrick, and Chaudhry
- 2017-*Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood* by Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez
- 2018-*Dress Coded: Black Girls, Bodies, and Bias in D.C. Schools* by National Women's Law Center