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Examining Discipline Integrity Among Black Girls in Urban Schools

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Abstract

School discipline has been of primary interest in education over the past six decades. Examining the expansive body of literature on zero tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the criminalization and exclusion of Black girls specifically sends a resounding reminder of the work that remains to be done in the interest of their educational needs, sustainability and overall well-being. While much has been written about the topic of school discipline and Black girls, less has been written on the topic of equitable, strength-based solutions that support their educational advancement, prioritizes the intricacies of their intersectionalities, and motivates schools to create and maintain cultures of care through educational policy and practice. Exploring discipline integrity as another valuable, intentional and inclusive approach can help affirm the worth of Black girls in schools, further empower stakeholders to make equitable decisions, engage community partners, mitigate educational risks and address ongoing concerns related to discipline integrity among Black girls in urban schools.

Keywords: school discipline, Black girls, equity, inclusion, worth, urban schools, discipline integrity

Introduction

The subject of school discipline and its related disparities and controversies has been of primary interest in education over the past six decades (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Green, 2022, Skiba et al., 2002; Staats, 2014). Many of the interests have been largely centered on topics concerning zero tolerance policies (Scott et al., 2017), the school-to-prison pipeline (Hassan & Carter, 2021), the criminalization, victimization, and exclusion of students of color (Crenshaw, 2015; Lewis et al., 2010), disproportionate discipline sanctions (Blake et al., 2011) and intersectional violence (Annamma et al., 2019). A large body of literature details the inequitable discipline experiences of Black boys in urban education; however, the discipline experiences of Black girls warrant a sustained focus by reason of the outcomes related to their intersectional complexities. Although much has been documented about the topic, less has been written about strength-based, equity-focused approaches and solutions that (1) support the sustainability of Black girls and educators and (2) inspire educational stakeholders towards cultivating cultures of care in schools through policy and practice. Exploring approaches such as discipline integrity can help address the discipline and well-being concerns specific to Black girls in urban schools.

When considering the growing mental health and social-emotional challenges Black girls face in schools (Cholewa, 2014; Leary, 2019), it is important that educational stakeholders are made familiar with various approaches to developing equitable school discipline policies that promote educational reform in the interest of Black girls. These policies must be focused on centering morality in educational policy. To help dismantle the oppressive mechanisms of systemic bias in schools that adversely affects Black girls (Ricks, 2014), urban schools should consider further examining the moral grounding of their strategic approaches when developing, implementing, and evaluating their operating policies. This critical examination and commitment to promoting equity in schools through policy have larger implications for the success and well-being of Black girls, which is the main theme and emphasis of this paper.

One may inquire, isn't equity in urban education enough when addressing discipline disparities? Especially when there is a vast amount of equity-focused literature in the field (Benadusi, 2002; Jurado de los Santos et al., 2020)? First, it is important to operationally define discipline integrity. We define discipline integrity (DI) as an approach to the discipline policy development and implementation process that intently and morally considers individual and

collective intentions, educational assets, and the practice outcomes that impact marginalized groups rather than in reference to a general or primitive understanding of professional etiquette and adherence to pedagogical mandates (see Figure 1). For instance, equity when referring to discipline practices in education has commonly been used to primarily promote fairness in educational policy and practice in schools (Simon, et al., 2007). This perspective is also often acknowledged and operationalized in terms of inclusivity and diversity (Ainscow, 2020; Taylor, et al., 2013), resource allocation (Gilbert, et al., 2011) and educational effectiveness (Kyriakides, et al., 2020). Given the ongoing, disheartening discipline related circumstances that Black girls have endured in education, equity alone is not enough and discussions around topics of integrity in school discipline policy development and its implementation.

Figure 1

This model demonstrates the components needed to understand discipline integrity.
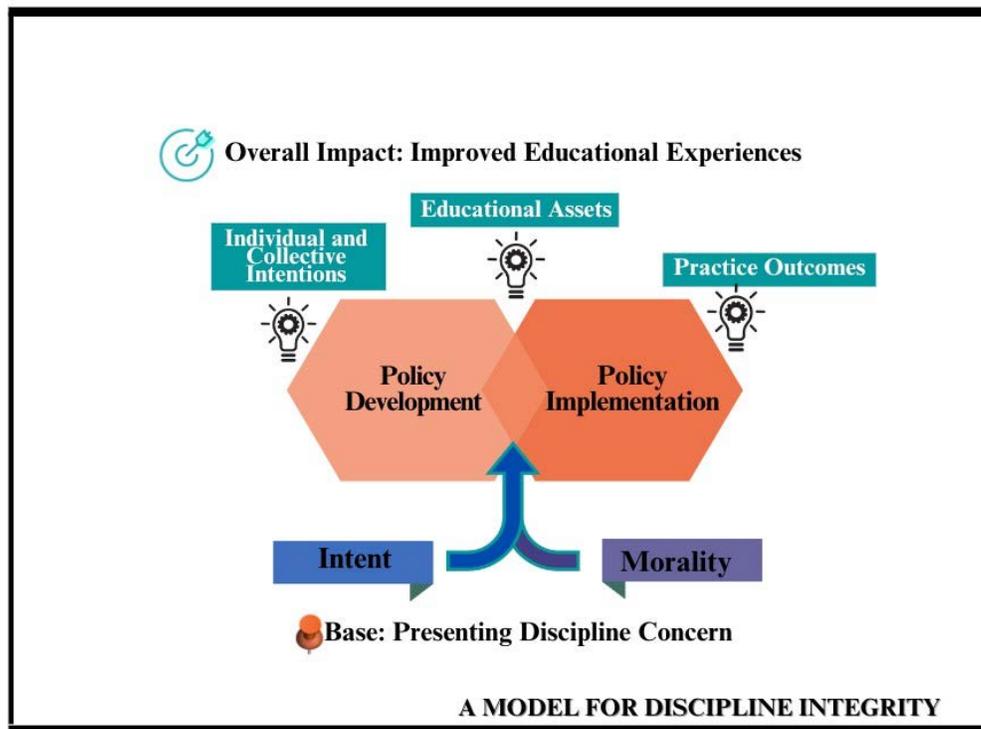
Particularly within urban schools, discipline among Black girls has been primarily associated with criminalization and discrimination and disproportionality (DatiriHines & Carter Andrews, 2020; Green, 2022). Since there are school policies and practices that are positioned in anti-Blackness (Wun, 2016), this ideology can be integrated in policy

development and practice while subsequently impeding discipline reform efforts and related restorative practices. Understanding that there may be Black girls in education may not have experienced the harsh effects of school discipline policies, there are many that struggle personally and academically because of the way these policies are implemented and subsequently sustained. According to Morris (2016), the struggles that Black girls face are often a matter of life and death.

Therefore, it is important that discipline integrity be considered during policy development and implementation in support of Black girls particularly in urban schools. According to Weeks (2010), the term "urban" has been acknowledged as a rather complex concept to define. The author further suggests that although the personal adjective "urbane" is intermittently used to describe a person, the word urban is broadly defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as having qualities and characteristics associated with town or city life-being a part of an urban population. Likewise, the word urban has been described by researchers throughout the literature as being a nonagricultural, place-based characteristic with a spatial concentration of people whose lives are organized around nonagricultural activities (Weeks, 2010). Milner (2015) identified three different conceptual frames for how we understand the term urban: (1) urban intensive (large metropolitan cities with 1 million people or more) (2) urban emergent (large cities with fewer than 1 million people) and (3) urban characteristic (areas smaller than large or mid-sized cities). Bibby & Shepherd (2004) categorized the term into three dimensions (1) population size (2) physically refined settlements and (3) economic status and wealth generation and Sorensen (2014) associated the term urban with industrialization and modernization of societies.

For the past 70 years the advantages for citizens in urban cities have contributed to the development of urban schooling, privileges that are not common in rural areas (Brint, 2017). Though many of the individual and community realities are related to the ongoing challenges that impact students in both urban and rural schools (Theobald, 2005), urban schools warrant a more concentrated effort due to their significant limitations around access to resources and opportunities (Milner, 2015). By working specifically with urban schools, educational stakeholders will have an opportunity to improve the lives and chances of students in this context with critical educational and individual needs (Friere 1998; Milner, 2015). Using a Critical Race Feminism (CRF) theoretical lens, this conceptual paper seeks to critically examine the systemic issues of disproportionate school discipline practices among Black girls

in urban schools through the perspective of what the authors term "discipline integrity". Further, the dual purpose is to (1) illuminate the worth of Black girls in education and (2) support the professional development of administrators and other educational stakeholders as they learn ways to best support and respond to the needs of Black girls. The discussion from the paper has significant implications and recommendations for urban schools and their approach to navigating school discipline.

Literature Review

Discipline Integrity and Policy Development

Martin and Smith (2017) argue that in the nearly 70 years post Brown v. Board of Education, we find ourselves navigating an educational system where Black girls continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged by structural inequalities, including those related to school discipline policies. According to McIntosh et al. (2018), many general efforts have been made to specifically address exclusionary discipline concerns; however, these efforts have not been shown to sustainably enhance equity in school discipline. In the case of DI administrators and applicable educational stakeholders in urban schools could adopt DI as a standard of practice in school discipline policy development and implementation to help dismantle rigid, systematically biased school discipline policies (Quinn, 2017). The primary purpose of DI in the context of urban education is to highlight the value of applying a morally upright, culturally responsive approach to developing, evaluating and implementing school discipline policies and practices in schools. DI is an important contribution to educational policy and practice because the approach can (1) help promote the safety, success, and wellness of Black girls and other marginalized groups by centering their needs and considering their risk factors (2) morally ground the school policy development and implementation process and (3) subsequently improve the school climate, operations, and student outcomes.

According to McFall (1987), integrity is a complex concept with traditional standards of morality such as honesty and fairness that may conflict with one's own personal ideals. Likewise, morality is a guide to behavior for a group or individual that includes accepting a moral code that avoids and prevents harm to others (Gert & Gert, 2020). Although research further suggests that morality may not include elements of impartiality regarding all moral agents and may not be universalizable in any significant way (Gert & Gert, 2020), it is

important to establish a common standard that administrators and applicable decision makers can use as an ethical guide to the school discipline policy development and implementation process, such as the DI model. In addition, creating an accompanying checklist as an administrative guide during the discipline policy processes may include the following questions: (1) have our meeting objectives been pragmatically established? (2) are our decision-making standards ethically and morally justified (do no harm)? and (3) have group norms been established for the specification process? (explaining the when, where, why, how, by what means, to whom or by whom the action is done or avoided) (Teays & Renteln, 2020). Since research suggests that implicit biases have a significant impact on decision making and that accountability alone is ineffective in reducing disproportionality (McIntosh et al., 2018), reviewing a standard checklist as a best practice can prompt a moral consensus prior to the policy development process and thereafter help dismantle the perpetual trends of oppression and inequity in the school discipline policy process.

Undeniably, administrators have the challenging task of making tough decisions as it pertains to ensuring the nobility of their institutional operations. Recognizing that social acceptability may present a challenge when considering the adoption of DI as a standard to address bias in policy development (Skiba, 2002), providing specific guidance in making objective, yet considerate decisions helps people display equitable behavior (McIntosh, et al., 2018). In addition to the micro and macro expectations of those in various contexts, there is a high level of vulnerability and accountability associated with making the best-informed decisions (McIntosh, et al., 2018)-especially related to discipline matters among students of color. To support administrators in this position, DI provides an opportunity to engage in a self/group-reflective process that encourages the moral examination of the approach to inform the school discipline policy process.

Mental Health and Black Girls

One of the most notable influences of disproportionate school discipline practices on Black girls is the impact on their psychological and emotional well-being (Blake et al., 2011). Research indicates alarming data and statistics related to the unmet mental health needs of Black girls. Sheftall et al., (2022) and Lindsey et al., (2019) found that Black girls, regardless of age, have experienced the largest suicide rate increase compared to Black boys. Additionally, the worry and stress resulting from some Black girls' efforts to navigate challenging home and school environments has been related to increased depression and decreased self-esteem,

among other adverse psychological symptoms (Brody et al., 2006; Cholewa et al., 2014). Being able to exist in schools in the absence of negative stereotypes, strained interpersonal relationships and exclusionary discipline practices is imperative to helping improve the mental health conditions and daily functioning of Black girls. The structural inequalities such as exclusionary discipline practices are likely to impact Black girls by transforming their environments, influencing their perceptions of school-based discriminatory experiences and may also have critical implications for their academic and psychological outcomes (Cooper et al., 2022; Morris & Perry, 2016).

For more than 60 years, the worth of Black girls has been challenged in education through innumerable disheartening experiences (Annamma et al., 2019; Morris, 2007; Zeiders et al., 2021). While equity efforts have helped to guide, enhance, and improve discipline practices, the persistent circumstances that continue to push Black girls out of schools warrants a more intentional effort in their interest. Crenshaw et al., (2015) encourages those concerned about the state of Black girls in education to broaden their understanding of the complexities of their intersectionalities and commit to enhancing resources to ensure that all youth, including Black girls, can thrive. Considering the benefit of an additional perspective to address the needs of Black girls in schools, the DI approach can help administrators and other relevant stakeholders': (1) center the well-being and matters of Black girls in schools and (2) enhance current approaches to school discipline policy making and implementation (i.e., strategic planning, delivery/communication, follow-up etc.).

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theories are frameworks that denaturalize white privilege in ways that expose the operations of oppressive social systems (Thompson, 2004). As an extension of traditional civil rights scholarship, Critical Legal Studies (CLS), and Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Race Feminism (CRF) is a theory that presents a pronounced way of analyzing and centering the narratives and voices of Black girls and women within various oppressive and discriminatory societal contexts (Davis, 2000; Wing, 1997; Wing, 2015). According to Matusda (1987), "those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen" (p. 324). Considering CRF's legal studies and CRT foundation, it is important to foreground the significance of their influence on the emergence of CRF.

Introduced in the 1970's CRT emerged as a body of legal scholarship by a community of mostly scholars and activists of color who were committed to studying and transforming racism at the intersection of race and power (Bell, 1995; Delgato & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is less like an intellectual unit consisting of theories and practices but rather one that is comprised of ways racial power is perceived and expressed in the post-civil rights era (Crenshaw, 2011). Further, Critical Race Theorists have elevated the influence of CRT through the exploration of the law's role in the maintenance of social domination, as well as policies that aim to subordinate minoritized groups (Peller et al., 1995; Milner, 2008). Given CRT's broad interdisciplinary influence, the theory can be characterized throughout research and practice by an expression of commitment to the following basic tenets: (1) ordinariness (disregard for racism); (2) interest convergence (advancing the rights of people of color when converging the interests of whites); (3) social construction (race and races are outcomes of social thought and relations); (4) differential racialization (disparities in treatment of minoritized groups based on labor market needs); (5) intersectionality (the interconnection of social categories); and (6) story/counter storytelling and narratives (amplifying voices of color in response to racism) (Delgato & Stefancic, 2017, 2023). Furthermore, CRT has been viewed to be critical/radical in nature, with an agenda to champion liberation from racism and critique liberal order (Bell, 1995; Delgato & Stefancic, 2017).

Considering the substandard perception of Black girls in schools due to the nature of their intersectionalities (i.e., gender, race), CRT plays a critical role in challenging oppressive discipline policies by not only centering their narratives but also focusing on other pertinent issues of race and racism in education (Annamma et al., 2019). Since scholars assert that education lacks safe spaces for race, class, and gender discussions (Wiggan et al., 2020), CRT brings an inclusive analysis that provides a promising pathway to discuss race relations, systemic bias, and the anticipated solutions in today's urban schools. This perspective directly challenges racial and structural inequities; however, identifying the need to address gender related disproportionalities inspired the introduction of Critical Race Feminism (CRF). CRF adds to CRT by exploring the intricacies of the lived experiences of those who face multiple discrimination at the intersection of race, gender, and class (Wing, 1996). Likewise, CRF is an empowering framework that reveals how these factors interact within a white male dominated system of racist oppression (Wing, 1996), particularly within the context of urban education. CRF has been instrumental in investigating Black girls' schooling experiences and

identifying development in educational spaces because of their exposure to disciplinary school policies and the recognizably gendered dynamics of zero tolerance surroundings (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). Using the framework's five tenants: (a) narratives and counter storytelling, (b) multidisciplinary perspectives, (c) community-focused theory and practice, (d) intersectionality, and (e) anti-essentialism (Berry, 2010; Shultz, 2009; Verjee, 2013; Wing, 1997; Wing, 2015), personnel in urban schools have an opportunity to inform the discipline policies and practices/approaches that shape school dynamics, conversations, relationships, and outcomes related to Black girls. Further, CRF serves as a useful advocacy tool when addressing the distinctive situations of Black girls whose lives and intentions may not comply with a standardizing female voice (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). If school leaders and decision makers are inclined to embrace CRF together with the support of community partners and other educational stakeholders to dismantle systemic oppression related to school discipline, this effort may be a source of optimism for realizing social justice and educational reform.

Discussion

An ongoing critical analysis of discipline integrity is important to further understanding effective, ethical ways to address the perpetuation of school discipline disproportionately in urban schools among Black girls. With each passing year, the school discipline narrative remains the same. Countless stories about the criminalization of Black girls in schools continue to circulate throughout the literature and the news. These girls and their families continue to navigate the adverse mental health outcomes associated with harsh discipline policies (Ricks, 2014), yet access to resources for marginalized groups remain limited. Since the patterns of exclusionary discipline practices involving Black girls are observed at the national, state, and local levels (Addington, 2021), it is important to consider the intentions, disposition and actions of policy makers-an influence that is central to ending these exclusionary patterns and improving the school discipline experience for Black girls.

Change is something that advocates and activists desire to see when addressing the concerns that Black girls continue to face in schools. Considering the complexities of their intersecting identities (i.e., marginalization, stereotyping) and the impact of their invisibility in schools are major concerns that should be a motivating factor to embracing the DI approach

to improving school discipline policy development and implementation. Administrators are encouraged to eliminate bias in their policies and any practice that reinforces oppressive practices in schools among Black girls (Green, 2022; Morris, 2007). Understanding that Black girls are often embedded in racialized school contexts that devalue their existence (Cooper et al., 2022), being intentional about ensuring morality in policy development can help nurture and protect Black girls from oppressive and discriminatory practices, improve educational outcomes that are impacted by racism and systemic bias and help strengthen interpersonal relationships among educators and Black girls that were once damaged by adverse actions and experiences.

Regarding morality, Abend (2013) asserts that most data and analyses in moral development research are about a specific action led by a judgment and made in response to a stimulus. Acknowledging that these judgements and actions are rarely simple and require an individual to weigh and coordinate moral and nonmoral situational elements (Killen & Smetana, 2007), morality related to school discipline decisions among Black girls means, for the purpose of this paper, to make judgments and decisions based on the following criterion: fairness and non-violence (i.e. absence of excessive force), mental and emotional health (i.e. valuing well-being and being sensitive to possible trauma), cultural responsiveness (i.e. consideration of cultural/ethnic background) (Gay, 2018), and inclusivity (i.e. including and acknowledging minoritized students). Using these benchmarks may well encourage educational stakeholders to pause and view matters and the subsequent impact of policy decisions from the perspective of Black girls and their families. Most importantly, these schools that use this approach can become global models of transformative education through the development, maintenance, and implementation of morally grounded school discipline policies and practices.

When teachers, administrators, stakeholders, and community partners use the DI model as a guide to their policy process, they make an outward commitment to promoting positive change in schools for Black girls. Everyone that participates in this process would be responsible for (1) objectively exploring the presenting discipline concern-examining all personal, social, and academic elements, (2) setting their intent and examining their moral standards using a common checklist to help guide the evaluation and decision-making process, (3) ethically create a plan of action in the best interest of the student, and (4) become champions for positive student outcomes. By doing so, the DI approach-when used as a

standard-can help mitigate the risks in the area of school discipline associated with Black girls (i.e., mental health concerns, criminalization).

Recommendations

District-Wide School Discipline Workgroups

Education reform and policymaking are not easy. However, when done intentionally, these processes have the potential to change the trajectory of students' lives. In the same way school districts assemble cadres of stakeholders to examine curriculum and assessment, establishing workgroups tasked solely with the responsibility of examining, revising, and creating discipline policies is essential. This work should center the experiences of students of color, namely Black girls, versus placing their concerns in the margins. In order to promote ethical policy development and implementation, these teams should first work to build meaningful and trusting relationships with each other (Schultz, 2019), using protocols that can be employed in their own schools. Implementing the use of DI in schools when creating, amending, and implementing school discipline policies can help to dismantle systemic oppression and prioritize the needs and well-being of Black girls in schools. More importantly, approaching school discipline in this way shows Black girls that they are worth the effort and that schools are making every effort to create a new narrative in school discipline policy on their behalf.

Additionally, it is also important that workgroup members begin to build and deepen their cultural competence (Ukpokodu, 2011) and engage in a "self-audit" process in which they begin to unpack any biases, misconceptions, or other factors that may prove to be barriers to taking a moral approach to improving the experiences of Black girls in the name of school discipline. Team members can also review their current standards and how those standards perpetuate discrimination and bias in their policy making process. Each member would be encouraged to consider the outcomes of their approach on the wellness and success of Black girls. The overall goal of the SDW is to co-create districtwide discipline policies to address the disparities for Black girls and other students of color. Members should be well- positioned to provide insight to both discipline policies and practices that have contributed to the current plight of Black girls, and therefore, will leverage that positionality in providing insight into updated policies.

Amplifying Student Voice

Salisbury et al. (2019) define student voice experiences as the "opportunities for students to participate in school-based educational decisions and processes that impact their and their peers' lives" (p. 223). However, despite a well-documented history of the impact of positive student self-advocacy, the voices of students are largely dismissed and excluded from the education policy-making process (Ginwright & James, 2022). Creating spaces for Black girls to engage as co-creators of education policy allows students to learn about education reform. These spaces can include student policy peer councils that review trends in discipline among Black girls and other marginalized groups. The group could submit their observations after reviewing student-appropriate, non-identifying reports, as well as identify solutions for positive change. With their input, administrators and other school leaders can center their needs and voices during their strategic planning and policy processes. Likewise, and more importantly, it allows Black girls to uncover potential blind spots in current discipline policy, identify non-policy-related factors that may impact student behavior (i.e., school culture), and build relationships with school staff (Mitra, 2018).

Family and School Partnerships

Hart & Butler (2022) proposed the creation and use of a restorative, wraparound framework to address school discipline disparities in urban schools. A critical component of this framework is the implementation of family-school partnerships. Scholars and practitioners have identified several positive impacts of family-school partnerships (Mapp et al. 2017). Partnering with Black girl and their families could provide further insight into their cultural background, socio economic needs, mental health concerns and any other factors that may contribute cause discipline concerns in school. While the need for and implications of meaningful family engagement are clear, many teachers feel ill- equipped to support this effort (De Bruïne et al., 2014; Willemse et al., 2018).

Current research begins to highlight several factors that contribute to these feelings of inadequacy. Grice (2020) identifies a lack of cultural competence as a barrier to familyschool partnerships and asserts that culturally competent educators can significantly improve the development of positive and collaborative relationships between schools and families of color. Creating family school nights to explore meaningful topics aside from academics could provide schools and families with insight needed to make better decisions around school discipline. Schools play a critical role in ensuring teachers have the knowledge, skills, and

dispositions necessary to implement effective family-school partnerships in support of Black girls. These groups should work in tandem to provide pre- service, beginning, and veteran teachers high-quality professional learning activities, to include elements of family engagement, specifically focused on this area.

Conclusion

Understanding our position in connection to oppressive and privileged systems and unlearning those systems' protective habits and practices requires an exceptionless, unceasing commitment (Love, 2019). This level of compassion extends beyond the morning school greeting, the mandated professional development workshop, and the daily classroom operations. This sense of compassion and commitment extends to the policy making level.

The concerns that Black girls face in education have been persistent for many years. In this 21st century, it is time to have real conversations about the challenges with the "source" of these persistent disparities. Similarly, it is important to explore practical solutions to not only address and inform the educational system but also the individuals that embody and operate the system. There is no system without the people that operate it. In order for educational reform on the behalf of Black girls to become a reality, efforts to improve the policies is imperative to realizing this change. Discipline integrity provides a pathway for the individuals and groups that make the decisions about school discipline to use their "point of privilege" to make decisions that are moral and just-those that support the sustainability, wellness and success of its students, educators, and stakeholders.

Making a difference in urban education means studying and applying the elements of discipline integrity and believing in its impact in schools, specifically on the behalf of Black girls. Embracing this approach will require a brave commitment to doing the necessary self-reflection and collaborative work to promote equity and integrity in schools. Future research on this subject should be focused specifically on how discipline integrity in urban school policy and practice can enhance the educational experiences of Black girls' and other students of color-while encouraging their academic success and overall well-being.

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